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The South African Women's Movement: The Roles of Feminism and Multiracial  
Cooperation in the Struggle for Women's Rights

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in History

by

Amber Lenser  
University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Arts in History, 2016

August 2019  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

In the historiography of South Africa's recent past, focus has been most heavily placed on apartheid and the anti-apartheid movement, with much emphasis placed on male involvement and men as the primary agents of change in the country. Women are largely viewed as playing a supportive role to male activists throughout the movement, and far less has been written on female involvement or women's activism in its own right. Running parallel to the anti-apartheid movement, however, was a women's movement characterized by women across the racial and socioeconomic spectrum struggling to secure their own rights in a very hostile and patriarchal political climate. The struggle of these women for their country but also for their own political rights has been largely overlooked in the existing narratives regarding South African history, as it has been overshadowed by the greater independence movement. By utilizing previously unused or undervalued sources including an array of oral histories as well as South African newspapers and organizational materials from important groups such as the Black Sash, I intend to show how influential South African women were on legislation passed under and immediately following apartheid, as well as their impact on the broader national struggle. I will also highlight the many formal and informal ways that these women carved out their own spaces, and the moments when their efforts transcended racial and class lines in an effort to build a brighter future for all South African women.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking my thesis advisor, Dr. Todd Cleveland of the Department of History at the University of Arkansas. Dr. Cleveland has long been a source of inspiration for me and has been an invaluable resource throughout the process of researching for and writing this thesis. He has always been encouraging, supporting and readily available to help me whenever I needed advice and motivation.

I would also like to thank the other professors on my committee, Dr. Jim Gigantino II and Dr. Richard Sonn, for their advice and motivation. I am extremely grateful for their participation on this project, and their enthusiasm in assisting me along the way. My success in my graduate studies, as well as my completion of this thesis, would not have been possible without the guidance I have received over the past two years from these professors.

I would like to acknowledge Tabitha Orr as the second reader of this thesis. Tabitha has been endlessly helpful and encouraging, and her assistance with this project is indispensable. No matter the time or day or how menial a problem may be, I have known throughout this process that I could rely on Tabitha to help me both with the writing process and by encouraging me to keep going.

Additionally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to my daughter, Amelia, for being my primary motivator; the reason for which I continue to pursue my goals. I am endlessly appreciative of her unconditional love and continued patience throughout this process. I am also forever indebted to the village of supporters that have helped love and care for my daughter throughout my work on this project.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: General Background and Discussion of Feminist Theory.....	15
Chapter Two: Feminist Activism: Formal and Informal Methods of Resistance.....	34
Chapter Three: Women’s Legal Rights: Influences of Activism on Legislation.....	71
Chapter Four: Lasting Impacts: The Female Experience in the Post-Apartheid Era.....	84
Conclusion.....	93
Bibliography.....	97

## Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century saw widespread activism around the globe as marginalized groups began organizing and challenging their oppression. The political landscape of the West was marked by movements pushing for labor, civil, and women's rights, while much of the rest of the world was experiencing indigenous-led independence movements against imperial powers. Decades and even centuries-old institutions that had been deliberately put in place to contain and control groups based solely on race, ethnicity, and gender were being shaken to their core and dismantled by the oppressed masses as they became more politically active. A spirit of change pervaded the air worldwide.

South Africa was not immune to this change, and in many ways its political climate was even more volatile than that of other countries, including those engaged in anti-colonial struggles against European imperialism as well as those involved in social struggles in the Western world. The white minority of South Africa's population had systematically segregated, disenfranchised, and exploited, often violently, the non-white majority since the country's inception. This racial mistreatment was legally codified with the implementation of the apartheid system by the National Party in 1948. People of color were forced from their homes and resettled in areas that were overcrowded and oftentimes lacked adequate housing, plumbing, and sanitation. On top of a lack of proper resources, blacks and coloureds were restricted to specific geographic areas and governed by pass laws that dictated which areas they could legally occupy, during what times, and for what purposes.<sup>1</sup> Frequently, families were torn apart because non-white men were sent to

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, in relation to race I will use several different terms to describe different groups. Under apartheid, South Africans were categorized into four different racial classifications: White, Black, Coloured, and Indian. Whites were of European decent, Africans were of African descent, Indians of Indian descent, and Coloured acted as a sort of ambiguous blanket term that covered persons of mixed descent and also groups indigenous to South Africa such as the Khoi and the San. Both in apartheid

work in areas where their wives and children were not allowed. Meanwhile, women were left behind in the homelands or in townships struggling to care for themselves, their children, and their extended families lacking the financial support that they would typically have received from a spouse. As the twentieth century progressed, anti-apartheid activism began to gain momentum in the face of increased violence against non-white people and a rising international awareness of the horrors of the apartheid system.<sup>2</sup>

From the anti-apartheid movement rose many influential activists who became household names--individuals such as Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, and Desmond Tutu. By the 1980s, the world could no longer ignore the humanitarian nightmare that was apartheid South Africa. International news and media sources assured that light was shone on the race-based injustices occurring in the country, and much of the rest of the world began to condemn the apartheid government and the systemic racism it had engineered. The anti-apartheid movement and many of the activists who became globally recognized have for the most part received extensive scholarly attention and have been thoroughly documented and recorded in historiography, as there has been a large focus placed on this dimension of South Africa's history since the fall of apartheid in the early 1990s.

Running concurrent to the anti-apartheid movement, though, was a women's rights movement characterized by formal and informal acts of resistance against gendered oppression. South African women of all races have a long-standing tradition of resistance and political activism, yet their struggles for female-specific rights and gender equality are nearly nonexistent

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legislation and in historiography, "black" can sometimes refer to any non-white person, including coloureds and Indians. I will most often use the term "non-white" in reference to people of color belonging to these racial classifications.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (London: Routledge, 2011).

in the historiography as they have been long eclipsed by the intense focus on the apartheid era and the resultant anti-apartheid movement. Largely missing from this written record is the involvement and impact of women on the anti-apartheid movement as well as the everyday experiences of women who were oppressed by the apartheid system. Although the history of these women is largely overlooked in the existing historiography of apartheid South Africa, it is both a rich and complex one. Fortunately, more scholars are beginning to focus on South African women and their contributions as activists during this era, with some emphasizing the activism of women for their own rights as opposed to their place in the anti-apartheid struggle.<sup>3</sup> From a heightened focus by many recent scholars on the place of women throughout history has sprung the study of “herstory”, or history analyzed through a feminist lens and with specific focus on the lived experiences of women. Although the vast majority of literature on African history still frames women as secondary actors in broader independence struggles, feminist scholars such as Bev Orton have begun to research and write the “herstory” of African women, analyzing their gendered struggles, experiences, and contributions that have previously been largely neglected by scholars.<sup>4</sup>

In this thesis, I will examine the struggle for women’s rights independent of the anti-apartheid movement to illustrate the complexity and vibrancy of the history of South African

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<sup>3</sup> Over the past two decades, scholars such as Bev Orton and Shireen Hassim have begun to pay closer attention to the history of South African women, or South Africa’s “herstory” by analyzing female experiences in their own right separate from the overarching apartheid system and anti-apartheid activism. Orton’s *Women, Activism, and Apartheid South Africa: Using Play Texts to Document the Herstory of South Africa* (2018) and Hassim’s books *Women’s Organizations and Democracy in South Africa* (2006) and *The ANC Women’s League: Sex, Gender, and Politics* (2014) have been monumental in expanding the field of study on South African women. While women’s issues independent of the anti-apartheid movement are mentioned, and some attention is paid to racial and cultural intersectionality, they are not deeply examined and much is still lacking in literature when it comes to gender-specific rights, informal instances of feminism, and racial cooperation in activism.

<sup>4</sup> Bev Orton.. *Women, Activism and Apartheid South Africa: Using Play Texts to Document the HERstory of South Africa*. Emerald Publishing: Bingley, 2018.



female activism. In the past two decades, scholars have begun to pay more attention to female political activism in South African history, but the foci of these studies have generally been narrow and exclusionary. Indeed, although scholars such as Shireen Hassim and J. Maki Motapanyane have more recently examined, South African feminism and female activism, little focus has been placed on the ways feminism has transcended important boundaries including those between whites and nonwhites, rich and poor, and rural and urban spaces. Furthermore, the temporal focus of scholarly work on women's rights activism and feminism in the country is generally narrowed to the mid-1980s and into the post-apartheid era, downplaying the existence and importance of female activism and feminist activity that occurred before the 1980s. In order to create a more holistic, inclusive narrative of female and feminist activism, I begin my study with the 1913 Bloemfontein Anti-Pass Campaign and analyzing South African feminism and female activism from that early event until the first democratic elections in the country in 1994. While this is a far broader temporal scope than is typically used when analyzing South African women's rights, I believe early activism and political involvement is fundamental to the progression and evolution of the struggle for women's rights. Pivotal time periods such as the 1980s cannot be properly evaluated or understood without addressing earlier instances of feminism, organization, and activism.

There has long been a trend when documenting women in South African history in which focus is narrowed to one specific group, or one specific decade, or one specific issue. Far more attention has been paid to women in the ANC than in any other political group. When analyzing female activism, the time frame is frequently narrowed to the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s. Issues that pertain to all women--such as abortion--are given more focus than issues that affect only marginalized groups, such as the many forms of cultural sexism. By placing my focus on

the women's struggle as a whole--a phenomenon that spanned the majority of the twentieth century and included women of all backgrounds--I hope to expand the understanding of South African history and the complex roles that women played in shaping the country both throughout the apartheid era and into the democratic period. I place more weight on the impacts of feminism on the movement, and on the examples of different groups of women working together, in an effort to change the reductionist way the female experience is typically presented, in which feminism was rejected and racial intersectionality is near nonexistent. I utilize evidence in order to show that the idea of feminism and gender equality was alive and well in South Africa in the twentieth century, and that many instances of racial cooperation amongst women helped to propel the women's movement and achieve many of the goals set by female activists as the country transitioned to democracy.

### **Apartheid: A Gendered Experience**

The day-to-day experiences of South African women were in many ways very different than those of their male counterparts. While apartheid in general and the possible conclusion of the harsh, racist white minority government were on the minds of everyone who had fallen victim to the system, injustices against women were also becoming a focal point for the female half of the population, and a target for activists nationwide. In addition to the restrictions and maltreatment that characterized apartheid in South Africa, women--and to the greatest extent, women of color--faced a host of their own issues, including rape and domestic violence, employment discrimination, and a lack of access to adequate medical treatment and education. These issues stem from what scholars such as Judith Noldé have referred to as "the triple yoke of

oppression”.<sup>5</sup> South African women of color were oppressed triply because of their race, class, and gender. These factors created a very unique lived experience for these women that cannot be reductively equated to the experiences of South African black and coloured men.

Historically, South African society across the racial spectrum has been very patriarchal and misogynistic and has been traditionally structured to prioritize the needs of men over those of women. Both “customary” law--the laws enacted and enforced by the country’s different indigenous communities--and common law--the laws put into place by the white South African government--were deeply chauvinistic and sexist in a plethora of ways. In both systems, women were considered legal minors, and were essentially under the ownership of a father or other male relative, or of their husband. They had no rights to land or property or to the custody of their children. In many African communities, *lobola*, or bride price, was paid by a husband so that he could take a woman as his wife, and consequently as his property. Men in many indigenous cultures were also polygamous, as was traditional in these cultures, allowed by customary law, and largely ignored in common law. Polygamy was in many ways detrimental to the women in marriages in which the husband had multiple wives as opposed to monogamous relationships, as there was a higher risk of disease, less money to go around for each subsequent wife and child, and often times less respect for each women as they were objectified by the practice of polygamy and treated as subhuman in many instances.<sup>67</sup>

Violence against women was a significant problem during apartheid--especially for black and coloured women--and continues to plague South African society into the present day.

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<sup>5</sup> Nolde, Judith. “South African Women Under Apartheid: Employment Rights, with Particular Focus on Domestic Service and Forms of Resistance to Promote Change” *Third World Legal Studies* 10.(1991): 203.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Mathabane, *African Women: Three Generations* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 12-18.

<sup>7</sup> Aninka Claassens, “Recent Changes in Women’s Land Rights and Contested Customary Law in South Africa”, *Journal of Agrarian Change* 13, no, 1 (Jan. 2013): 71-92.

Violence exhibited itself in many ways in the lives of South African women. Relationship violence was a frequent occurrence for South African women of color. Recent literature has cited violence against women in South Africa as being the product of emasculated and volatile men created by the apartheid system, who were protected by sexist, patriarchal customary laws in instances of domestic violence because of their essential ownership of the women in their family.<sup>8</sup> Outside of customary law, police and the courts rarely issued punishment for perpetrators of domestic violence as it was simply not a priority. Women were oftentimes subjected to sexual violence as well, in a multitude of different situations. Women were abused sexually by their husbands, by their male employers, by strangers in dangerous and turbulent neighborhoods, and by law enforcement officials in detention centers. Women also experienced violence as corrective punishment by their employers, as was very common in the domestic labor sector in which many impoverished black and coloured women found remunerative work.<sup>9</sup>

Labor and employment were largely gendered, and the types of occupations that men and women occupied were vastly different from one another. Women of color most frequently worked domestic labor jobs, where they were often mistreated by their employers, had little to no job security, and were paid a fraction of what white domestic laborers received. Women who decided to take financial matters into their own hands and earn their own income faced threats by law enforcement for running illicit business operations, as well as the threat of retaliation from

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<sup>8</sup> Pamela Scully's *Liberating the Family?* offers in-depth analysis of the transition from slavery to emancipation following the fall of Cape Slavery. Her book evaluates the ways in which post-emancipation society was structured according to gender and the ways in which patriarchal oppression was influenced by emancipation and newfound rights for freedmen. Studies specifically on violence against women such as "Violence Against Women in South Africa: Policy Position and Recommendations" by Ramadimetja S. Mogale, Kathy Kovacs Burns, and Solina Richter analyze the influence of a longstanding history of racial oppression of men of color on gender relations in the country.

<sup>9</sup> Kathy Kovacs Burns, Ramadimetja S. Mogale, and Solina Richter, "Violence Against Women in South Africa: Policy Position and Recommendations", *Violence Against Women* 18 no. 5 (2012): 580-594.

abusive husbands who were not supportive of their wives making their own money or having what they considered an inappropriate amount of power over their lives and their earning potential.<sup>10</sup>

Women also faced many issues in the medical realm. Women of color more often than not lacked access to basic medical care, and frequently reached out to traditional healers to help them with any ailments they faced. Traditional medicine was far less reliable than the care that white women--regardless of socioeconomic status--would receive at Western-style hospitals from trained doctors. In areas where black and coloured women could visit a doctor or a hospital, the facilities were underfunded, overcrowded, and lacked the proper resources to provide suitable care. Female-specific care and fields such as obstetrics and gynecology were oftentimes prioritized even less in medical establishments for black and coloured peoples, which were already extremely subpar in comparison to hospitals and clinics in white areas. Abortions were nearly totally illegal in the country throughout the apartheid era, and thousands of women a year belonging to each racial group visited illicit abortionists or attempted to self-abort at home; both constituted dangerous paths that led to injury, illness, and even death for many women who lacked access to safe and legal abortions. The acute lack of affordable and attainable medical care in apartheid South Africa drove countless women to seek out hazardous, unsafe alternatives in an array of medical situations.<sup>11</sup>

Owing to these gendered challenges, women during the apartheid era began challenging patriarchal oppression in both informal and formal ways. Individually and informally, many women of color began attempting to earn their own income and take control of their financial

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<sup>10</sup> Mathabane, 15

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Hodes, "The Culture of Illegal Abortion in South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42 no. 1 (2016): 79-93.

situations rather than relying on wages from a discriminatory employer or seeking full financial support from their husbands or from other men in their lives. For example, some women opened *shebeens*, or speakeasies where they brewed their own alcohol and sold it illicitly. Some sold handcrafted goods. Others would walk considerable distances to farms whose owners were willing to overlook their lack of proper employment permits, and they would collect produce on the farm and bring it back to their neighborhoods to sell it.<sup>12</sup> Aside from seeking financial independence, women also began asserting their agency by refusing to marry if *lobola* was exchanged, as they wanted to retain some level of autonomy and not fall victim to the objectification, mistreatment, and likely abuse that characterized many *lobola* marriages. Some women would even insist on being wed under common rather than customary law, so that they would have the right to divorce if they pleased and could gain custody of their children and ownership of their property when leaving a marriage.<sup>13</sup>

More formally, women began to boycott, protest, and organize. Women's mass organization began with the Bloemfontein anti-pass campaign of 1913, where hundreds of women under the leadership of Charlotte Maxeke marched to the City Hall to protest demanding the abolition of passes for women.<sup>14</sup> Another example of female involvement in large-scale public protest included the Defiance Campaign of 1952, which was spearheaded by the African National Congress and consisted of large-scale anti-apartheid demonstrations in several cities across the country.<sup>15</sup> Four years later, between ten and twenty thousand women of all races

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<sup>12</sup> Mathabane, 132-136

<sup>13</sup> Mathabane, 15.

<sup>14</sup> South Africa History Online, "The 1913 Women's Anti-Pass Campaign", accessed April 18th, 2019. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/1913-womens-anti-pass-campaign-orange-free-state>

<sup>15</sup> South Africa History Online, "Defiance Campaign 1952", accessed April 18th, 2019. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/defiance-campaign-1952>

marched on the Union Building in Pretoria to again protest pass laws, an impressive and successful action that culminated in the acceptance of their petition for the government to stop issuing passes to women. August 9th consequently became National Women's Day and continues to be celebrated annually.<sup>16</sup> Notable activists who gained prominence from these types of formal political activism included Jean Sinclair who founded the white liberal women's group the Black Sash, and Helen Joseph, Ray Alexander, and Lillian Ngoyi who were each largely influential in their own right and together created the Federation of South African Women in 1954.<sup>1718</sup>

Many influential groups were formed by South African women over the course of the twentieth century. Some served the interests of specific groups of women, such as the Bantu Women's League which was an anti-apartheid organization created by women like Charlotte Maxeke who wanted to be politically active but were excluded from membership in the largest political organization for blacks in the country, the ANC, based on their gender. In 1948, this organization would become the ANC Women's League. The Black Sash is a human rights group formed in 1955 by white liberal activist Jean Sinclair. The Sash was impactful across South African society as it served the interest of many different groups and tackled issues as diverse as pass law violations, mistreatment in detention centers, domestic violence, and the death penalty. The Federation of South African Women was formed in 1954 and had an impressive and very inclusive, multiracial array of members. FSAW pushed for enfranchisement, equal pay,

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<sup>16</sup> South Africa History Online, "The 1956 Women's March in Pretoria", accessed April 19th, 2019. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/1956-women's-march-idara-akpan>

<sup>17</sup> Chery Michelman, *The Black Sash: A Case Study in Liberalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975) 12.

<sup>18</sup> Meghan Healy-Clancy "The Family Politics of the Federation of South African Women: A History of Public Motherhood in Women's Antiracist Activism" *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42 no. 4 (2017)

increased property and custodial rights, and racial equality. Their Women's Charter, conceived at their founding conference, prioritized women's rights in an unprecedented manner, as the needs of women were backgrounded by the anti-apartheid movement.<sup>19</sup> The first outwardly black feminist group would not be founded until 1987; Women Against Repression was founded by coloured activist Rozena Maart with the sole purpose of combating gender-based inequality in the country.<sup>20</sup>

### **A Feminist Approach**

The topic of feminism is a contentious one both in South African society contemporarily and historically, as well as the historiography concentrated on the country's social history. Many black and coloured South African women rejected the notion of feminism, casting it as being a white woman's luxury, but not a privilege that they could afford while fighting the broader independence struggle to liberate themselves from racist oppression. Feminism to many women regardless of race was viewed as being nothing but a hyper-liberal Western concept for women who were not facing such dire issues as those that pervaded colonial society. Historically, the term "feminism" has carried a negative connotation, thought by many to be inherently anti-male and a theory that prioritized the rights of women over those of men. In the ensuing section, I will consider different types of feminism, the ways in which various groups of South African women viewed and interacted with feminism, and the actions and behaviors of women that I believe were feminist in nature according to feminist theory.

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<sup>19</sup> Healy-Clancy, 2-5.

<sup>20</sup> Rozena Maart and Carol Anne Douglas, "International Interview: Black Feminist in South Africa" *Off Our Backs: A Women's Newsjournal* 19 no. 9 (1989): 1-3.



Much has been written about women's role in the anti-apartheid movement, though they are frequently portrayed as secondary, supporting characters.<sup>21</sup> What still needs to be further investigated and documented to create a more holistic narrative of recent South African history, however, is the women's rights movement that commenced in the twentieth century and continues into the present day. This thesis aims to contribute to that narrative by detailing many facets of this movement and illustrating the importance of female activism to the legal and political landscape of the country following the downfall of the apartheid regime and the nation's transition to democracy. I will also address topics that have previously been contentious in the field of South African history, such as the role that feminism played in the lives and actions of women from different sociodemographic groups, and the instances of activism that transcended race and unified women across the racial spectrum through their uniquely gendered experiences. By addressing and analyzing the issues of feminism and racial intersectionality in female activism, I will be fitting myself into the historiography with scholars such as Meghan Healy-Clancy, Jen Thorpe, and Bev Orton who have all worked over the past few years to open up a dialogue on race, feminism, and activism.

## **Methodology**

In conducting research for this paper, I accessed a variety of primary sources to better understand the unique, personal experiences of South African women from all different backgrounds. I conducted interviews with a handful of South African women, some of whom lived here in the States, and some who reside in the Western Cape. I analyzed several volumes of

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<sup>21</sup>Scholars such as Gay Seidman have pointed out that women are usually viewed as “recipients of state policies rather than agents in the construction of new states” because analysis on the country has predominately focused on race and class but neglected gender, such as in the cases of Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley's book *The Negotiated Revolution; Society and Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (1993) and Anthony Marx' *Lessons of Struggle: South African Internal Opposition, 1960-1990* (1992).

secondary literature, including oral histories collected and organized by scholars such as Barbara Hutmacher MacLean, Patricia Romero, and Diana Russell, all of which focus on the lived experiences of South African women from different races, ethnicities, belief systems, and socioeconomic classes. I also visited the Special Collection archives at the University of Cape Town to access materials covering female activism and South African feminism, such as the expansive Ray Alexander collection, and the Black Sash collection. Additionally, I mined a number of biographies and autobiographies of South African women, including Winnie Mandela and Ellen Kuzwayo to reconstruct the day-to-day experiences of women and their thoughts and reactions to gender inequalities, politics, motherhood, and their hopes and expectations for the future of their country.

Scattered throughout these primary source materials are glimpses into the lives and minds of South African women of all races, ethnicities, religions, and classes. There are many tales of hurt, mistreatment, abuse, and defeat. Innumerable women fell victim to discrimination, alienation, and violence based simply on the shade of their skin or their gender. However, within these sources reside glimmers of hope, enthusiasm, and pride. Although South African society as well as much scholarship produced in relation to the country's past depicts women as supporting players to their male counterparts, and as helpless victims to the many injustices they faced, there is a multitude of evidence that women were extremely driven, ambitious, and passionate about their rights and the human rights of all South Africans. In this thesis, I utilize these previously unused or undervalued sources to show that South African women of color displayed impressive resilience in their struggle to secure an equal place in society, even as they simultaneously struggled to overcome apartheid, and that these women frequently collaborated with others

across the various racial divides to achieve their goals of greater freedoms and equality in a turbulent and rapidly changing world.

## Chapter One

### **General Background and Discussion of Feminist Theory**

South Africa's modern gender issues are not simply a product of the apartheid era or of the country's recent past, but instead can be traced back over a century before to when European colonialism spread to the area and the Cape Colony was established. To forge a deeper understanding of women's issues in South Africa, we must look to the influences of Dutch and British colonialism on the formation of South African society, the roles in which gender played throughout the time of Cape slavery and into emancipation, and the transition into the apartheid era. The British brought with them their own notions of proper gender roles and the ways in which men and women should function in society, which proved to be quite influential. South African society following emancipation was deliberately structured not only hierarchically according to race, but also in a manner that supported European ideas of gender roles. By tracing the evolution of South Africa's gender history from the days of Cape slavery and into the present, the influence of British and Dutch gender roles and cultural misogyny on the experiences of South African women are readily apparent.

Slavery and the Forced Labour Model was introduced to the Cape in 1652 by the Dutch East India Company, and Cape slavery perpetuated throughout Dutch and later British rule for nearly two centuries until its ultimate demise in 1834. After the British took control of the Cape and it officially became a colony in 1814, large numbers of British settlers started immigrating to the area, with the first few decades of the nineteenth century seeing the largest influx of white

settlers to South Africa and the continent in general.<sup>2223</sup> A larger white population made for more tense race relations and gender relations as those in charge began organizing South African society according to racial hierarchy as well as what they perceived to be proper gender roles. Slavery in the Cape was characterized by a heavily gendered division of labor. Enslaved males primarily worked as agricultural laborers, while women were predominantly domestic workers--roles ascribed to them because of British concepts of gendered capabilities and proper gender roles. Both enslaved men and women suffered from specifically gendered issues that would go on to influence post-emancipation society and the gendered experiences of freed people.<sup>2425</sup>

Slaves were dehumanized and commodified, stripped of basic rights and refused many aspects of personal life that whites took for granted. Slaves prior to amelioration legislation were typically not allowed to marry, except in rare cases of marriage between converted Christian slaves with the permission of their owners. Slavery was inherited through the matrilineal line, ensuring that all children born to slave women would inherit slave status. This norm of matrilineal inheritance of status helped to perpetuate a self-reproducing slave population, and many times slaveholders would forcefully impregnate slaves to supplement this population. Enslaved men were denied legitimate paternity and were not afforded the masculine experience of respectable marriage and fatherhood that white men were allowed. Parents also frequently suffered separation from their children as families were often split up and sold to different

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<sup>22</sup> “History of Slavery and Early Colonisation in South Africa” South African History Online. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-slavery-and-early-colonisation-south-africa> (Accessed November 16th, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> “Britain Takes Control of the Cape.” South African History Online. <https://sahistory.org.za/article/british-takes-control-cape>. (Accessed November 16th, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Scully, 28-29.

<sup>25</sup> Helen Bradford, “Women, Gender, and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape colony and Its Frontier Zones, C. 1806-1870” *The Journal of African History*, vol 37 no. 3. (1996), 351-370.

owners, as children born into the institution of slavery belonged not to their parents but as property to their masters.

Violence against women was endemic in Cape slavery. Slave women were subjected to violence by their masters, by the women for whom they worked, and by male slaves. Violent acts committed against women by enslaved men has often been viewed as a product of the systematic emasculation of black and coloured men by the system of slavery and white oppression Sexual violence committed by slaveholders and white authority figures was especially rampant as slave women were not legally classified as humans, but rather as property, meaning abuse against them was not criminalized. Slave men were often powerless in helping their female counterparts in the case of rape, as there was no action they could take to protect them without facing vicious punishment. This further repressed slave masculinity and contributed to increased hostility between slaves and their masters.<sup>26</sup>

Enslaved women of color faced not only physical violence, sexual abuse, and trauma over their powerlessness as mothers and wives, but were also labeled as “sexually licentious” and “childlike”, which further reduced the respect they received from whites as well as from their male counterparts. British settlers believed women to be morally superior to men and placed on them the weight of being moral pillars for their families and communities. British people both in favor of and against slavery believed slave women’s shame thresholds to be lowered because of routine beatings that they received in the nude, which whites believed made slave women more apt to engage in sexually risky behavior. Many whites also attributed the alleged sexual licentiousness of slaves to their supposed biology, believing that the shape of their bodies and genitals made them more sexually unrestrained. On one hand, then, black and

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<sup>26</sup> South African History Online. “The Early Cape Slave Trade”. Accessed December 2nd, 2018. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/early-cape-slave-trade>

coloured women were considered to be sexual deviants incapable of being bound by British morality and virtue, and on the other hand these women were seen as childlike, naive, and weak. The Cape Ordinance of 1826 stated that slave women should be subject to the same level of corporate punishment as a free child. Although this legislation seemed positive for slave women as it regulated the physical punishment to which they might be subjected to, it also codified an equivalence between women and children, which would prove influential in the drafting of free labor laws in the post-emancipation period.<sup>27</sup>

As the country moved toward emancipation, the white minority began deliberating how to properly incorporate formerly enslaved peoples into a free society while still maintaining their carefully instilled racial hierarchy. Religion went hand in hand with British ideals of virtue and morality, and evangelicals and missionaries were largely influential in the abolition of Cape slavery and the restructuring of post-emancipation society. White missionaries opposed slavery because of the ways they believed it had stripped slave men and women of their shame, respectability, and responsibility. It was commonly believed that slaves must be emancipated into a moral society that championed disciplined labor and the nuclear family, which the British thought was the only acceptable and civilized family structure. To free the slaves into a society of wage labor and British ideals would help to civilize and domesticate the nonwhites of the empire, bringing Christian virtue to the masses and building an efficient and respectable working class that would consequently benefit the empire as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

Following emancipation in 1938, missionaries took responsibility for instilling morality and British style gender expectations on the masses. Missionaries were aggressively encouraging

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<sup>27</sup> Pamela Scully. *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823-1853*. (Portsmouth, Heinemann Publishing, 1997). 35-38.

<sup>28</sup> Julia Bush, "'The Right Sort of Woman': Female Emigrators and Emigration to the British Empire, 1890-1910", *Women's History Review*, 3:3, (1994), 185-409.

of legal, monogamous marriage. For women, monogamous marriage was used as a form of protection from the prominent theory of nonwhite sexual licentiousness and the consequential sexual abuse that arose from such a misconception. Supposed promiscuity had long been used as an excuse for men, white and nonwhite alike, to take advantage of women sexually.

Additionally, marriage was the only legal contract in which women could take part, and many did so to use their husbands as a means to negotiate labor contracts and to bring abusers to court, which they had not been allowed to do prior to emancipation. For men, marriage was a symbolic reclamation of masculinity and authority that had been stripped from them under slavery.

Married men were able to claim their paternal rights, which had long been denied to them. Also, men were legal authorities and had full control over their wives, further instilling in them a masculinity that had long been restricted, while simultaneously creating a culture of patriarchy and toxic masculinity from which countless women would suffer throughout the post-emancipation period, into the apartheid era, and into the present day.<sup>2930</sup>

As freedmen were taking advantage of their newly acquired rights and acceptable forms of masculinity, women remained abundantly oppressed by both the law and the deeply patriarchal society that was characteristic of the nineteenth century. While women were free from the bounds of Cape slavery in 1838, they immediately acquired legal minor status and were legally subordinate to either male family members or their husbands. Women occupied the same legal space as children, and were afforded essentially no legal rights over employment, child custody, land ownership, or bodily autonomy. This legal categorization further perpetuated the idea of women as inferior, objectifying an entire gender. Although they were no longer the

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<sup>29</sup> Scully, 108-115

<sup>30</sup> J.L. van der Walk "The Culturo-Historical and Personal Circumstances of Some 19th Century Missionaries Teaching in South Africa" *Bulletin for Christian Scholarship* Vol 57. (1992). 75-85.



property of white slave owners, women were now the legal property of the male figures in their personal lives. Women of color and former slaves were not the only victims of the sexist classification of women as minors; it applied to white women as well. Legal oppression was one way in which women of all races were victimized by legal and cultural patriarchy.

Women's subordinate status in the country left them incredibly vulnerable, and in a multitude of ways. Women could technically enter labor contracts following emancipation, but because of their legal status, their contracts were dictated by the male authority figure to whom they belonged. Another "freedom" granted to nonwhite women following emancipation was the freedom to bring men to court on sexual abuse charges. This right was extremely important both logistically and symbolically, as women had long been subjected to sexual violence and had no rights as humans to achieve justice for themselves. However, the ability to bring an abuser to court was complicated in several ways. Because women were legal minors, marital rape—as well as domestic violence—were not illegal. Rampant and exaggerated masculinity in the country by newly freed men, paired with the newfound ownership over women, created a culture of widely accepted relationship abuse that went largely unchecked both socially and legally. A woman's race also complicated the legal proceedings regarding sexual violence, as nonwhite women were frequently blamed for any abuse they suffered owing to their alleged inherent promiscuity and lack of Western morals. The lesser important legal status of women, combined with racist notions about nonwhite sexuality, have left a gap in the archival evidence and subsequently the historiography on sexual violence on women in nineteenth century South Africa.<sup>31</sup>

Victorian thought pervaded not only Great Britain over the second half of the nineteenth century, but it had also spread rampantly throughout the colonies and especially in societies with

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<sup>31</sup> Scully, 154-162

large settler populations, such as South Africa. Victorianism championed wage labor and Christian morality and virtue, repressing sexuality and condemning non-Western forms of marriage and family life. The idea that women belonged in the domestic sphere was extremely widespread during this time, and British society in South Africa expected nonwhite women to display their civilized and domesticated nature by performing wage labor as servants and domestic workers. Consequently, domestic servitude was the domain in which most nonwhite women worked. However, because of the idea that women's place was in the home—her own or someone else's—working class and unmarried white women largely existed in the realm of domestic labor as well.

Beginning in the last decade of the nineteenth century, British women from the metropole began emigrating in large numbers to the colonies seeking out domestic labor positions. There existed a deep-seated fear of miscegenation throughout the British Empire, and the prevalence of black women working in positions of domestic servitude was seen as a risk to racial purity. The influx of white domestic workers into South Africa was a response to an empire-wide campaign to bring “the right sort of woman” into the colonies. These women were expected to bring feminine virtue to the colonies, along with a sense of maternalism toward nonwhites who were viewed as childlike in their mental state and regarding their ability to properly perform respectable work. This “imperial maternity” and supposed racial duty to populate the colonies was reflected heavily in propaganda in print media such as “The Imperial Colonist”. White women were expected to emigrate both to act as literal mothers within the colony, to reproduce with white men in colonial society and to create a desirable class of respectable and virtuous

British-derivative whites, as well as figurative mothers for the lost and childlike nonwhite populations in the colony.<sup>32</sup>

White women who emigrated in the latter years of the nineteenth century who ended up in domestic servitude were simultaneously thought of being in need of protection from the “inferior races” with whom they worked, as well as being needed to act as “moral surveillance” to their fellow servants of said “inferior races.” Moral surveillance involved the actions and guidance of white women being used to civilize and Europeanize the supposedly morally lacking laborers of nonwhite heritage. This widespread idea of white female morality, purity, and virtue helped to reinforce the notion of otherness of black domestic laborers, and black women in general. While the usage of white women acting as moralistic teachers and in a maternalistic fashion was thought to be uplifting to the black and coloured community and was utilized as a civilizing effort, it actually helped perpetuate the oppression of nonwhite women as it reminded society at large of their supposedly-deserved subordinate status and their moral impurity.<sup>3334</sup>

Systemic racial segregation, economic inequality, and legal and cultural patriarchy pushed African women to begin organizing against these various forms of oppression. The first instance of mass female mobilization in South Africa occurred in response to the attempted implementation of pass laws that would restrict the movement of women between geographic spaces and require them to carry a pass at all times. Passes for non-whites had been utilized since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to delimit slaves to specific regions of the country and, in particular, to keep them from entering the Cape Colony. Shortly after the two major groups of whites in the

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<sup>32</sup> Barbara Bush. “Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century” in *Gender and Empire*, edited by Philippa Levine, 95. Oxford, Oxford, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Bush, 396-397

<sup>34</sup> Shireen Ally. *From Servers to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State* (Ithaca, Cornell, 2009). 23-27

country—those of British heritage and the Boers of Dutch heritage—joined together to create the 1910 Act of Union, the government attempted to expand the use of passes to women. During the 1913 Women’s Bloemfontein Anti-Pass Campaign, urban black women in the Waaihoek region rebelled by refusing to carry their passes, burning their passes in the streets, signing petitions to present to government officials, and marching while shouting and violently wielding sticks. Many women were arrested; however, this fervor for action began to spread throughout the country and women from all over began marching, burning their passes, and organizing to resist and protest. Their displays were successful, and the government pulled back from trying to expand pass requirements to women.<sup>35</sup>

In 1948, the National Party came to power and instituted the racialized system of apartheid, which sparked another wave of activism both from the ANC and from a series of women’s groups. There followed a revived attempt to require women to carry passes, drafted into legislation as the Native Laws Amendment Act of 1952 that would require all blacks over the age of sixteen to carry a pass regardless of gender, against which women again rebelled. On August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1956, more than 20,000 women—many who had been bussed in from other parts of the country and had come with children in tow and babies on their backs—marched and protested at the Union Buildings in the capital city of Pretoria. This event showed that South African women were willing and enthusiastic about protesting and rebelling against unfair governmental legislation and restriction, and that they were prepared to fight for what they believed in. Influential female activists such as Kate Mxakatho took part in the march, not only as a protest against pass laws, but as a demonstration of female solidarity and to prove that

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<sup>35</sup> “The 1913 Women’s Anti-Pass Campaign in the Orange Free State.” South African History Online. <https://sahistory.org.za/article/1913-womens-anti-pass-campaign-orange-free-state>. (Accessed November 30th, 2018).

women were capable of much more in the anti-apartheid struggle than their male counterparts were allowing them.<sup>3637</sup>

Women's issues extended far beyond the geographically restricting pass laws. The Women's March in 1956 set a precedent for female activism that would perpetuate throughout the apartheid era and into the present day. The early 20th century saw not only the emergence of wide scale public protest by Africans and by women, but this period was also characterized by the rise of political organizations. The African National Congress was founded in 1912 by middle class black Africans and gained traction throughout the century. The ANC was one of the earliest and largest political organizations in Africa, and its broad popularity led it to be the backbone of the South African independence movement as well as the largest and most successful political party in South Africa into the present day. Despite the party's success and its call for solidarity and cooperation to further the independence movement, it excluded female membership from its inception until 1943. Even throughout the twentieth century following the addition of female membership, ANC leadership remained predominantly male, and many women felt as though their interests were not represented by the organization. In response to their full out exclusion or limited involvement in overarching political organizations, South African women of all races formed their own organizations that catered both to the anti-apartheid movement as well as to female specific interests that were largely ignored by larger, male dominated groups. In the following section I will address a number of women-led political organizations that gained prominence in the twentieth century, including the ANC Women's

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<sup>36</sup> South Africa. Parliament. Native Laws Amendment Act, Act No. 54 of 1952. Johannesburg, South Africa: Union of South Africa, 1952. Accessed November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Brooks, 175.

League (formerly known as the Bantu Women's League), the Federation of South African Women, the Black Sash, and Women Against Repression.<sup>38</sup>

## **A Discussion of the Literature**

In much of the scholarship on apartheid South Africa, a heightened focus is placed on the anti-apartheid movement and frequently on the male leaders of this movement. The heavy focus on these two factors—economics and influential male activism—is present in all of the most prevalent academic historiographical accounts of the demise of apartheid, including *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* by Nancy Clark and William Worger, *The Origins and Demise of South African Apartheid: A Public Choice Analysis* by Anton D. Lowenberg and William Hutchison Kaempfer, *Tomorrow Is Another Country: The Inside Story of South Africa's Road to Change* by Allister Sparks, and *The Rise, Fall, and Legacy of Apartheid* by Eric Louw. These are the perspectives read most frequently by the general public, as well as in academic settings, which is problematic as there is not a significant focus on the roles of women anti-apartheid activists and interracial female activism; therefore, the story of the anti-apartheid movement and the fall of apartheid is not complete.

*Tomorrow Is Another Country: The Inside Story of South Africa's Road to Change* by Allister Sparks is a bit outdated now, as it was written in 1995, only a year after the first fully democratic elections in South Africa. It is useful in its close temporal proximity to the events that ended apartheid, but it focuses heavily on the political negotiations that ended apartheid, and largely excludes women from the narrative. *The Origins and Demise of South African Apartheid: A Public Choice Analysis* by Anton D. Lowenberg and William Hutchison Kaempfer is also somewhat dated, as it was written in 1998. However, it holds a heavy focus on domestic

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<sup>38</sup> Arianna Lissoni et al., *One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories Today*, (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2009), 29-34.

aggressors and activism as vehicles of change, which makes it more useful than Sparks' book in viewing a more holistic picture. Ultimately, though, *Origins and Demise* attributes the fall of apartheid to the country's struggling economy. Louw's *The Rise, Fall, and Legacy of Apartheid* also cites labor struggles and domestic and regional economic decline as the main reasons for the fall of apartheid. Originally published the same year as Louw's work—2004—the anti-apartheid movement and the fall of the apartheid regime is analyzed in *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* by Nancy Clark and William Worger. This account is the most inclusive and does place more importance on female activism than the other works. Yet it remains problematic as it does not focus on intersectionality in feminism, but rather the influence of individual groups. Across the board there is needed a detailed account of economic and racial intersectionality in South African feminism under apartheid, and what implications on the destruction of apartheid and formation of a democratic society that feminism and activism held.

Far less attention has been paid to the role of women in the movement, and even less has been written on specifically feminist activism in the country and the struggle for women's rights independently of the struggle for racial equality. Some books that deal with the broader African continent, including Gwendolyn Mikell's *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa* and Kathleen M. Fallon's *Democracy and the Rise of Women's Movements in Sub-Saharan Africa*, address South African examples of female activism, but only with short examples to fit into a broader, more continental narrative. As previously discussed, scholars such as Bev Orton and Shireen Hassim have finally helped to open up discussion about South African female activism, with specific focus on political involvement displayed through theater and women's roles in the ANC, respectively. In spite of this growing body of literature of South African "herstory", historiography surrounding activism and political movements in the

twentieth century often neglects the influential roles that women played—and, specifically, women of color. However, evidence actually shows that there was a thriving culture of women’s activism in the country. Newspaper articles, memoirs, and oral history collections illustrate the ways that women across the racial spectrum were very active in the struggle not only against the apartheid regime, but also for their own legal rights regarding a wide range of specifically female issues.<sup>3940</sup> It is important to place focus on the roles of women in the anti-apartheid movement and the feminist consciousness that propelled the concomitant women’s rights struggle in order to fully understand how the South African experience was gendered, and how women of all backgrounds strived to create a better country—one both free from the racist apartheid regime, as well as from the various forms of gendered oppression.

## **Feminism**

“[S]ince feminism was un-African, I decided I would now call myself a Happy African Feminist. Then a dear friend told me that calling myself a feminist meant that I hated men. So I decided I would now be a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men. At some point I was a Happy African Feminist Who Does not Hate Men And Who Likes To Wear Lip Gloss and High Heels For Herself And Not For Men.”

-Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*

Feminism is an extremely complicated and, arguably, loaded concept, one that has caused much debate amongst scholars and has become associated with many negative connotations outside of academia. Should you go around asking people their definitions of feminism, chances are you will be met with a range of different answers, and likely some unkind and heavily critical retorts. Feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie illustrates this point perfectly in her essay “We Should All Be Feminists” when she says “[T]hat word *feminist* is so heavy with baggage,

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<sup>39</sup> Gwendolyn Mikell, *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 257-276.

<sup>40</sup> Kathleen M. Fallon, *Democracy and the Rise of Women’s Movements in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 44-52.



negative baggage: you hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture, you think women should always be in charge, you don't wear make-up, you don't shave, you're always angry, you don't have a sense of humour, you don't use deodorant".<sup>41</sup> Perceptions of feminism have varied widely since the re-emergence of feminist activism in the US in the 1960s. Consequently, defining feminism has been a source of contention among scholars ever since.

Put most simply, feminism is the belief that men and women should have economic, social, and political equality.<sup>42</sup> Feminist activism is, in turn, characterized by actions and behaviors that work to attain this equality of the sexes. Feminist theory however has many nuanced definitions, each characterized by different societal and environmental factors. South African women across the racial spectrum have a rich and longstanding tradition of political activism as well as less formal methods of carving out spaces to attain agency over themselves. Much of this activism can be labeled as feminist in nature, though the majority of coloured and black women participating in these acts of formal and informal defiance would never have identified as feminists. Even as feminist ideology proliferated around the globe in the latter half of the 20th century, many women of color throughout the developing world rejected feminism as a white woman's luxury. These women were often fighting their own battles against systemic poverty and maltreatment imposed on them by Western forms of domination as well as via cultural patriarchy. The issues they faced, such as poverty, starvation, and police brutality were seemingly quite different than the issues white women were tackling, such as bodily autonomy and pay equality. It was difficult for women with such disparate life experiences to conceptualize

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<sup>41</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, (New York, Anchor Books, 2012), 10-11.

<sup>42</sup> Merriam Webster, "Feminism," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism>, (Accessed April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

their shared struggles or to recognize that capitalism and male domination were oftentimes to blame for the oppression they faced.

Analyzing feminism in a developing world context is no easy feat, as scholars have long disagreed on what does and does not constitute feminist activity and how feminism outside of the West should be defined. So-called second-wave feminism in the West was easily identifiable, as feminists were unabashedly vocal on their ideology, while the issues for which they were fighting were clear. Women in the West were vying for their rights as individuals--for bodily autonomy, sexual freedom, and greater opportunities in the economic sector and equal pay for equal work. These concerns defined second-wave feminism in places such as the US, yet they were not representative of the concerns of women around the globe, or even of all American women. Further marginalized groups such as disabled women, women of color, and trans women were still largely excluded from the activism characterizing this feminist movement. Second-wave feminism embraced the idea of sisterhood and a shared female experience, but in reality, women around the globe were not a homogenous group, and the issues faced by women varied greatly dependent on factors such as their race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and physical ability.<sup>43</sup>

In the 1980s, Western feminists began to expand their focus beyond their own set of first-world gender inequalities, which in turn led to the rise of global feminist thought among white liberal thinkers and academics. This new brand of feminism recognized that women worldwide were combatting various types of oppression and was consequently a more inclusive outlook on the female experience. Global feminism, however, still boiled down the cause of all female oppression as being patriarchal in nature, and still championed the notion that women regardless

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<sup>43</sup> Asma Mansoor, "'Marginalization' in Third World Feminism: Its Problematics and Theoretical Reconfiguration" *Palgrave Communications* 2 (1).

of environmental factors still experienced life and oppression in a similar manner simply because of their biological sex. Scholars such as Chandra Mohanty have criticized global feminism as still being overly simplistic and ignorant to the many different factors that characterize the female experience in different geographic locations.<sup>44</sup> From the criticisms on second-wave Western feminism and global feminism arose two new distinct schools of feminist thought: third world feminism and transnational feminism, both of which expanded the inclusivity of the term “feminist” and analyzed feminism in a non-Western context. Third world feminist ideology arose first and promoted the idea that women in the third world experienced oppressions relative to the particularities of their geographic locations. Transnational feminism ascended to the realm of popular thought in the last decade of the twentieth century, and deconstructed feminist theory in third world contexts by removing the focus of particular nation-states on feminism in the third world.

Transnational feminism acknowledges that many women in previously colonized areas share similar forms of oppression stemming from Western domination and the globalized economy, regardless of their specific nation-states. For the past two decades, transnational feminism has been the predominant school of thought in relation to feminist practice and activism in the third world. Although many generalizations can be made about previously colonized regions and the experiences of women therein, ignoring the importance of the nation-state in feminist analysis devalues the impact of local politics on these women and excludes many local forms of oppression stemming from political, economic, and cultural factors endemic in specific locations. In a focus on South African women and their relationships to feminist ideology, one should not ignore or negate the influence of specifically South African politics and

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<sup>44</sup> Ranjoo Seodu Herr, “Reclaiming Third World Feminism: or Why Transnational Feminism Needs Third World Feminism”, *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 12, no 1. 1-30.

the country's complicated history on the female experience. From the days of Cape slavery, through the apartheid era, and into the present-day South Africa has a unique history that does not mirror the history of the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, though it does share similarities such as European colonialism and white-minority regimes.

Similar to the American example, South African society is incredibly diverse and the women in the country all face varying issues and have their own individual experiences and struggles within larger, more encompassing social struggles. One narrow and rigid definition of feminism could never begin to describe the many different types of behaviors and activism exhibited by women in the country. South Africa straddles the divide between the first and third worlds, a country heavily defined by its binaries--black/white, rich/poor, developed/developing. The country experienced the largest European settlement in sub-Saharan Africa, and still maintains the highest white population of any country on the continent, which has historically caused large disparities in wealth and opportunity. Slavery and similar labor models following emancipation introduced people of many different ethnic backgrounds into the area from other parts of Africa as well as Asian countries such as India and Malaysia. These movements of people further diversified South African society and complicated South African race relations as more groups were being oppressed and exploited for cheap labor. The introduction of new ethnic groups and cultures also further complicated women's rights and the female experience in South Africa as women from different groups were often treated differently by the law, by the white majority, and by the men from their own group. Expansive cultural diversity and consequently varying female experiences also make it impossible to apply one definition of feminism to South African History.

One of the leading scholars on feminism in Africa, Gwendolyn Mikell, described African feminism as being “distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal, and concerned with many “bread, butter, and power” issues.”<sup>45</sup> I believe this to be a myopic and reductionist definition of African feminism. To narrowly define African feminism in this manner overlooks every bisexual or lesbian woman, every trans woman, and every woman who sought out birth control or abortion because of personal choice or medical or financial necessity. The rigidity of this definition is exclusionary and over simplistic, and assumes that the majority of African women have had similar life experiences as symptoms of the colonial and post-colonial eras, while ignoring the geographic and cultural complexities that also play a large part in the shaping of women’s individual experiences. Many scholars share Mikell’s belief that African feminism is its own distinct ideology, one focused predominantly on survival and in many ways antithetical to the more individual-centric Western feminism.

Throughout this thesis, when I utilize the words feminism and feminist, I recognize that the women to which I am referring may never have adopted those terms for themselves or may have full out rejected the labels of feminism and feminist ideology in general. Rather, I am assigning these descriptors to behaviors, actions, and people that I believe are feminist in nature. Also, I am not viewing this history through the lens of one specific branch of feminist thought. South Africa’s history of apartheid and white majority rule combined with the country’s vast cultural and racial diversity make for a female experience that cannot be viewed separately from local specificities, making it too unique an example to be described by transnational feminist thought. It is also a society characterized by broad economic, ethnic, and racial diversity to an extent that it cannot be analyzed solely through the lenses of third world feminism or African

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<sup>45</sup> Mikell, 17.

feminism. In the following sections, I will simply refer to actions and behaviors that I deem feminist because of the ways that they are performed and utilized deliberately to further the rights of women and the fight for gender equality as well as individual agency and autonomy free from the oppressive hands of legal and cultural patriarchy.

## Chapter Two

### **Feminist Activism: Formal and Informal Methods of Resistance**

The majority of literature written on South African history deals with the country's long and complex history of political activism. It is near impossible to think of South Africa without automatically thinking of the country's turbulent and dark past, and the anti-apartheid movement that helped bring an end to systemic racism in the country. Women have frequently been invisible in this literature, a phenomenon scholars such as Helen Bradford and Linzi Manicom have referred to as 'endemic gender-blindness'.<sup>4647</sup> A few biographies of women, such as Winnie Mandela's *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69* and Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography *Call Me Woman* have helped to expand the narrative of activists and leaders to include influential women, as well as oral history collections like feminist scholar Diane E.H. Russell's *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*. Thankfully books such as these help to shed light on the day-to-day experiences and perspectives of influential political women in South Africa that are frequently missing from general histories and the overarching narrative of political activism in the country.<sup>4849</sup>

Many impactful men in South Africa's political past became household names in the latter years of the apartheid era. Many people outside of the country still know of figures such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, men whose names have worldwide renown and connote peace, love, and equality. Female activists in the country have not been afforded this same kind

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<sup>46</sup> Helen Bradford. "Women, Gender, and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and Its Frontier Zones, C. 1806-1870" *The Journal of African History*. Vol. 37. No. 3. (1996) p 352-353.

<sup>47</sup> Linzi Manicom. "Ruling Relations: Rethinking State and Gender in South African History" *Journal of African History*. vol. 33. No. 3. (445-449).

<sup>48</sup> Winnie Madikizela-Mandela *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Ellen Kuzwayo. *Call Me Woman*. (San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1985).

of attention. Although politically active women and influential feminist figures have consistently slipped through the cracks in the literature, as well as the worldwide perceptions of South Africa, in reality countless women across all races and backgrounds fought as gallantly as their male counterparts in the liberation struggle, as well as in the women's rights movement. These women proved themselves invaluable to social and political movements in South Africa throughout the twentieth century and into the present day.

A perfect place to begin tracing the history of female political involvement and the impact of female influence on South African politics is with Charlotte Maxeke, a woman with an impressive resume and a passion not only for racial equality, but also female empowerment. Maxeke studied at Wilberforce University in Ohio from 1899-1901 under the guidance of W. E. B. du Bois, becoming one of South Africa's first black women to graduate from college. While at Wilberforce, she met her husband Marshall, a fellow politically minded South African. Charlotte and her husband both attended the launch of the South African Native National Congress--or, SANNC--which would go on to become the African National Congress. Maxeke became very politically involved in the second decade of the twentieth century--a time when education, power, and influence were unattainable for the vast majority of black South African women.<sup>50</sup>

Maxeke helped organize the 1913 Bloemfontein Women's Anti-Pass campaign in order to protest the restrictive pass laws being imposed on non-white women in the Orange Free State. Maxeke and other leaders in this demonstration managed to get over five thousand signatures on a petition denouncing the pass laws. Following the rejection of this petition, women marched in the streets to protest and burn their passes. This event would mark the beginning of a long history

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<sup>50</sup> "Charlotte (nee Manye) Maxeke". South African History Online. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people> (accessed February 12th, 2019).



of passionate female activism. Five years later, Charlotte started the Bantu Women's League, which predated the ANC Women's League and was the first all-women's organization in the country. Women were not allowed full membership in the ANC, so the Bantu Women's League offered an outlet for women to address not only the problem of racial inequality in the country, but also their own female-specific issues.

Maxeke was perhaps the first prominent black feminist in South Africa, as she began focusing on women's issues well before other leaders and organizations began to. She wrote of the "woman question" in periodicals such as *Umteteli wa Bantu*, a political publication in the Xhosa language. She also gave address a conference of Christian students at Fort Hare in 1930 with a speech entitled "Social Conditions Among Bantu Women and Girls," in which she illustrated the many difficulties black women faced as their husbands left to go work in the cities. In the speech, she stated, "I would suggest that there might be a conference of Native and European women, where we could get to understand each other's point of view, each other's difficulties and problems, and where, actuated by the real spirit of love, we might find some basis on which we could work for the common good of European and Bantu womanhood". A true progressive, Maxeke showed not only concern for women and girls and their gendered oppression, but also a hope that white and non-white women alike could work together to solve female specific issues, setting a precedent for female activism and racial cooperation in South Africa.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bantu Women's League". South African History Online. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/bantu-womens-league> (accessed February 18th, 2019).

Claire Cook. "Charlotte Maxeke, Tireless Campaigner for Women's Rights" Australian Women's History Network. <http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/charlotte-maxeke/> (access February 18th, 2019).

Charlotte Maxeke. "Social Conditions Among Bantu Women and Girls". Address by Charlotte Maxeke at the Conference of European and Bantu Christian Student Associations at Fort Hare, June 27-July 3, 1930" South Africa History Online. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/social-conditions-among-bantu-women-and-girls-address-charlotte-maxeke-conference-european-a> (accessed May 20th, 2019).

Racial discrimination and segregation only worsened as the twentieth century progressed. In 1948, when the National Party came to power and implemented the system of apartheid, millions of non-white South Africans feared for their lives as racism became codified to an extent it had not been in the past. The early years of the 1950s experienced a revival of compulsory passes on women, as well as forced resettlement in places such as Johannesburg. The Native Resettlement Act of 1954 extracted many Africans from their homes in Johannesburg and resettled them into crowded townships outside of the city--a phenomenon that would spread across the country in the decades following.<sup>52</sup> Millions of black, coloured, and Indian citizens were removed from their homes--typically in multicultural neighborhoods near the heart of cities--and moved into townships or homelands where resources and space were scarce and violence and crime abounded. The segregation of various population groups based on race and culture helped the white government and police forces to more easily control people of color and to consolidate power based on constructed interracial and ethnic tensions. Those in charge deliberately and systematically created a society in which cheap labor was easily produced and perpetuated while maintaining a separateness that helped to support and regulate the regime's preferred racial and gender hierarchies. Although all odds were against people of color as legislation further oppressed them, a spirit of revolution was revived and the oppressed began to challenge their oppressors.<sup>5354</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Union of South Africa, *Natives Resettlement Act, No 19 of 1954*, Johannesburg, Government Printer, 1954. Web, <https://0-www-aluka-org.library.uark.edu/stable/viewer/10.5555/al.sff.document.leg19540604.042.000.000> (accessed June 19th, 2019).

<sup>53</sup> Cosmas Desmond, *The Discarded People: An Account of African Resettlement in South Africa*. (Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1971). 120-122.

<sup>54</sup> Luvuyu, Wotshela. "Territorial Manipulation in Apartheid South Africa: Resettlement, Tribal Politics, and the making of the Northern Ciskei, 1975-1990." *Journal of South African Studies* 30 (2): 317-337

Female activism was also revived during the 1950s, after laying relatively dormant for the previous decades. Although women were still active in political organizations during the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, little was being done or said about women's issues in their own right, especially issues faced by women of color. Prior to the 1950s, much of the women's rights struggle had been "conducted *by white women for white women.*"<sup>55</sup> However, many influential women--white and non-white alike--gained prominence in the '50s following the implementation of the apartheid, and the movement saw a radical shift toward racial cooperation in the struggle for women's rights. Racist legislation, cultural and legal oppression of women, and rapidly changing global politics made for a vibrant environment of newfound activism, cooperation, and organization to combat various evils in the country. The female activists who gained prominence in the mid-twentieth century were from diverse backgrounds, and often joined together to combat various injustices in the country, even as the powers-that-be attempted to keep races separate and resistance to oppressive governmental policies at bay.

A rise in white liberal thought and anti-apartheid sentiment during the mid-twentieth century paved the way for white women to become influential in the struggle. Ray Alexander Simons was one of those women, a driven and passionate individual who would prove influential to men and women, white and non-white in the Western Cape throughout the apartheid era. Ray was only a teenager when she arrived in Cape Town in 1929, yet she was already very ambitious and politically minded. A dedicated member of South Africa's Communist Party, she began working as a labor organizer in the 1920s and '30s, specifically with black unions. She helped to politicize many South African women by spreading communist ideology, as well as her thoughts on racial and gender equality. Simons' Marxist background, as well as her experiences with

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<sup>55</sup> Diana E.H. Russell interview with Helen Joseph, 209.

antisemitism in Europe, made her sympathetic to the plight of the non-white population in South Africa and the resultant liberation struggle against the apartheid regime. In the early 1940s, Ray met and married Jack Simons, a professor of African Studies at the University of Cape Town. Together, they went on to become the first white members of the ANC (in 1967), and later wrote a book entitled *Class and Color in South Africa: 1850-1950*.<sup>5657</sup>

In 1954, Ray was one of the founding members of the Federation of South African Women, an organization formed specifically to include women of all socio-demographic backgrounds and to serve women of every race and ethnicity. FEDSAW was revolutionary at the time because of its multiculturalism and also its emphasis on female-specific rights. Simons helped to draft a Women's Charter, as she "wanted to bring women's rights to the forefront" and she recognized the importance of focusing on women's rights at the same time as the liberation struggle so that the status of women was given proper attention and priority.<sup>58</sup> Many political women during this time, such as Simons, felt that if women's rights were neglected or eclipsed by the liberation movement, then women would not achieve the equality they deserved when new legislation was drafted. Many women worried that they would remain perpetually oppressed even after South Africa became a democracy. Fellow FEDSAW member Ruth Mompati said of this perspective, "We feel that in order to get our independence as women, the prerequisite is for us to be part of the war for national liberation. When we are free as a nation, we will have created the foundation for the emancipation of women."<sup>59</sup> Organizations such as FEDSAW

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<sup>56</sup> Milton Shain and Miriam Pimstone. "Ray Alexander (Simons)". Jewish Women's Archive. <https://jwa.org.encyclopedia/article/alexander-simons-ray>. (Accessed April 30th, 2019).

<sup>57</sup> Ray Alexander Simons, South African History Online. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/ray-alexander-simons> (Accessed April 30th, 2019).

<sup>58</sup> Diana E.H. Russell interview with Helen Joseph, 205.

<sup>59</sup> Diana E. H. Russell interview with Ruth Mompati. *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*. (New York, Basic Books, 1989). 116.

worked to ensure that gender specific issues were addressed, in addition to the broader anti-apartheid struggle.

Another prevalent female activist during this period was Helen Joseph, a white, liberal British woman who immigrated to South Africa in 1930. Joseph lived first in Durban, a heavily segregated city in Natal province with a large Indian population, before joining the South African Air Force. According to Joseph, while in the Air Force, she and her colleagues were taught to have “a liberal, tolerant attitude of mind” and “were fed with masses of left-oriented material from England.”<sup>60</sup> She cites her time in the Air Force as being a pivotal time in the evolution of her political opinions, as she was exposed not only to liberal literature and opinions from England, but also to information about the conditions of race relations in South Africa. Her subsequent work in non-white communities in Cape Town and Johannesburg gave her insight regarding the many racial injustices happening in the country and a perspective on the racist apartheid government that was uncommon for many other whites in the same place of privilege. Joseph was very supportive of the ANC and the anti-apartheid movement, and helped to form the Congress of Democrats in Cape Town, a liberal white ally of the ANC. She spoke at the ANC’s Congress of the People in 1955 and was held in very high regard by the organization.<sup>6162</sup>

Joseph was often critical of different organizations for being exclusionary, like the gendered imbalance of power in the ANC and the exclusion of blacks from membership in the early years of white liberal organization, Black Sash. While she respected the Sash for its anti-apartheid and human rights activism, Joseph was critical of the group for excluding black women

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<sup>60</sup> Diana E. H. Russell Interview with Helen Joseph. *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*. (New York, Basic Books, 1989). 200-204

<sup>61</sup> “Helen Joseph”. South African History Online. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/helen-joseph>. (Accessed April 20th, 2019).

<sup>62</sup> “Congress of the People and the Freedom Charter”. South African History Online. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/congress-people-and-freedom-charter>. (Accessed May 30th, 2019).

simply because they did not also have the right to vote, stating that “It seemed a little ironic that the women were white but their sashes were black.”<sup>63</sup> Joseph also avoided organizations such as the League of Women Voters and the Business and Professional Women’s League because they consisted only of white women and did not extend membership to women of color.

Joseph was also a founding member of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) and organizer of the Women’s March of 1956, (which will be discussed in detail later in this section). FEDSAW prided itself on its diverse membership, and the leaders of the organization were likewise from very different backgrounds. Regarding the Women’s March, Joseph said, “Four women had been chosen as leaders for the day. Lillian Ngoyi, the African, Rahima Moosa, the Indian, Sophie Williams, the coloured, and I, the white. We represented the multiracial membership of the Federation of South African Women..”<sup>64</sup> The Federation is a wonderful example of the existence and success of racial cooperation amongst women--an aspect that is frequently overlooked in existing narratives such as Mikell’s *African Feminism* that assert that women of different races each had their own issues and that the problems that women face and consequent activism rarely transcended color lines.

Out of all the women Joseph worked with in her various political ventures, she held none in as high regard as she did Lillian Ngoyi. In both her autobiography and her 1989 interview with feminist scholar Diana E.H. Russell, Joseph praised Ngoyi, referring to her as “the great leader of all time...[dwarfing] all other women leaders”.<sup>65</sup> Ngoyi was a black woman from Pretoria. She was able to attract many nonwhite female followers because she had similar life experiences and was able to stand in solidarity with the masses. She joined the African National Congress

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<sup>63</sup> Helen Joseph. *Side by Side: The Autobiography of Helen Joseph*. (London, Zed Books, 1986). 33-35.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph, 12.

<sup>65</sup> Diana E.H. Russell interview with Joseph, 1989.

following the 1950 Defiance Campaign and went on to become the first woman of any race to be elected to the ANC's National Executive Committee, some six years later. She played an instrumental role in the formation of FEDSAW and served the organization as its first vice president and later as its president. Ngoyi led the anti-pass march in 1956, addressing the crowd of 20,000 women. Her anti-apartheid activism extended beyond her work within the country's borders, and she travelled the world addressing different protests around the globe, including at London's Trafalgar Square.<sup>66</sup> Her bravery and ambition made her a role model for many women in the struggle, and Winnie Mandela herself said, "My greatest experience was meeting a woman who was my hero at that time, Lillian Ngoyi. We all worshipped her. Her name was a legend in every household, and we all aspired to be a Lillian Ngoyi when we grew up."<sup>67</sup>

The 1960s and 70s were a tumultuous time for the anti-apartheid struggle and the women's movement. In the spring of 1960 during an anti-pass campaign, police opened fire on hundreds of nonviolent protesters from the Sharpeville township, leaving dozens dead and many more injured. Women were active members of this demonstration too, and many were left "lying dead on the open square with their babies on their backs."<sup>68</sup> People around the country were outraged following news of the massacre, and consequently riots broke out. The apartheid government declared a State of Emergency in response, and major anti-apartheid organizations such as the ANC and the Pan African Congress were banned. Governmental and police crackdowns on activism, the banning of organizations, and mass detention of activists made it near impossible to properly maintain both the liberation struggle and the women's rights

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<sup>66</sup> "Lillian

<sup>67</sup> Diana E.H. Russell interview with Winnie Mandela, *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*. (New York, Basic Books, 1989). 101.

<sup>68</sup> Diana E.H. Russell interview with Nontsikelolo Albertina Sisulu *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*. (New York, Basic Books, 1989). 151-152.

movement, and groups such as FEDSAW fizzled out at this time. Feminist activism was likewise relatively quiet for the following decade and a half.<sup>69</sup>

The mass imprisonment and exile of many political leaders and activists who opposed the apartheid government were intended to fracture and weaken the opposition movement. Key members of the anti-apartheid movement such as Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu were sentenced to life imprisonment in a huge blow to the movement. However, as these men were being detained and exiled en masse following the 1960 State of Emergency, women quickly and courageously replaced them at the forefront of the liberation movement. One of these women was none other than Mandela's wife, Winnie, a shining example of the type of influential women who kept the movement alive even as the government took considerable action against this form of activism. Winnie was courageous, radical, and quite militant--all factors that made her a force with which to be reckoned. She fought fearlessly against the apartheid government, while also acting as an example of a strong, independent, no-nonsense female leader for the many South African women who looked up to her.

Mandela was active in several women's organizations, including the Federation of South African Women, the ANC Women's League, and the Black Women's Federation--a group she helped create in 1975. She was heavily inspired by Lillian Ngoyi and Albertina Sisulu, whom she cited as helping her be courageous when Nelson was imprisoned, and she became the face of his struggle. She was present during the Soweto massacre, which she described in brutal detail during an interview in 1989,

It was the most painful thing to witness--the killing of our children, the flow of blood, the anger of people against the government, and the force that was used by the government on defenseless and unarmed children. I was present when it started. The children were congregated at the school just two blocks away from here. I saw it all. There wasn't a single policeman in sight at that time, but they were called to the scene. When they fired

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<sup>69</sup> Russell, 8.



live ammunition on the schoolchildren, when Hector Peterson, a twelve-year-old child, was ripped to pieces, his bowels dangling in the air, with his little thirteen-year-old sister screaming and trying to gather the remains of her brother's body, not a single child had picked up even a piece of soil to fling at the police. The police shot indiscriminately, killing well over a thousand children.<sup>70</sup>

The atrocities that Mandela witnessed, paired with traumatic experiences of her own--such as torture and solitary confinement in prison and exile away from her children--worked to radicalize Winnie and mold her into a dedicated, if controversial, figure.

Winnie did not condemn violence as a means to an end, but instead was said to be “willing to necklace anyone, man or woman, who stood in the way of her liberation objectives.”<sup>7172</sup> Support of violent tactics and allegations of murder and kidnapping ultimately tarnished Winnie's image, arguably to a further extent than a male activist's reputation would have been tarnished for the same actions. Nelson Mandela, Winnie's husband and a global icon of peace and nonviolence, had a long track record of promoting violent acts, such as the use of car bombs, and the torture of black people who collaborated with the apartheid government. Despite his contentious and problematic past, Nelson was held in high regard as a Ghandi-like figure: a beacon of love, peace, and equality, while Winnie remained vilified, especially by the white community. In an interview I conducted with a white South African woman, Shannon Collie, I was told, “Everyone loved Nelson. He was an amazing man and a very respected leader. Many of us were terrified of Winnie, though. She was often violent and could be very scary.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Diana E. H. Russell interview with Winnie Mandela. *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*. (New York, Basic Books, 1989). 102.

<sup>71</sup> Necklacing is the act of torture in which a gasoline filled tire is placed around someone's chest and shoulders and then set on fire. It is a practice that was used widely on both sides during apartheid to kill victims on the opposing side.

<sup>72</sup> Tau Tawengwa, “Winnie Mandela, A True African Feminist”. *The Sunday Mail*. 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Shannon Collie, November 17th, 2018.

These are illustrative examples of the influence of gender on public perceptions of and expectations for influential figures and leaders.

While Winnie Mandela did not refer to herself as a feminist, she was vocally critical of patriarchal oppression and sexism in the country, as well as the women who passively accepted their gendered oppression. She criticized the position of women in South Africa, saying “The overwhelming majority of women accept patriarchy unquestioningly and even protect it, working out the resultant frustrations not against men but against themselves in their competition for men as sons, lovers, husbands. Traditionally, the violated wife bides her time and off-loads her built-in aggression on her daughter-in-law. So, men dominate women through the agency of women themselves.”<sup>74</sup> Winnie used her platform as member and leader of organizations such as the ANCWL to appeal to the masses of nonwhite women in the country and encourage them to stand up for themselves and reject their inferior position in society. Her influence was far reaching, and inspired women such as Florah Mathabane, a poor black woman from the township of Alexandra, outside of Johannesburg, who recalled, “The sight of Winnie Mandela defying apartheid, asserting her presence and legitimacy as a woman and a leader, and exhorting crowds to fight without flinching against white power, was most inspiring and empowering. I never thought a woman could be like that.”<sup>75</sup>

After a short period of suppressed political activism following the 1960 State of Emergency and subsequent banning of opposition groups, the 1970s saw a revival in activism and large political movements, this time led predominantly by students and other young adults. The Black Consciousness Movement, spearheaded by famed African nationalist Steve Biko,

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<sup>74</sup> Faith Daniels, “Winnie Madikizela-Mandela: A Woman Way Ahead of Her Time”, JacarandaFM.com, <https://www.jacarandafm.com/news/opinion/winnie-madikizela-mandela-woman-way-ahead-her-time/>, (Accessed April 11th, 2019).

<sup>75</sup> Mathabane, 206.

helped instill a sense of racial pride and solidarity amongst nonwhite South Africans, which helped to spark a new wave of anti-apartheid sentiment and consequent resistance. The Black Consciousness Movement was largely influential on young men and women who belonged to each non-white racial classification, not only “black” or “African.” A newfound sense of racial pride spread throughout Indian, coloured, and African communities as people began embracing the parts of their identities of which the nonwhite minority had long conditioned them to be ashamed. Mamphela Ramphele, partner of Biko and renowned anti-apartheid activist, said of the movement, “For the first time, many black women found new pride in themselves as they were. They were no longer ‘non-whites’, but blacks with an authentic self, appreciated in their own terms...Having been assertive as blacks, women claimed greater psychological space in which to assert themselves in both public and personal relationships.”<sup>76</sup> By the late 1970s, revived political fervor was rapidly spreading amongst South African youth. The country was ablaze with ideas of revolution, liberation, and equal rights for the entirety of South Africa’s vastly diverse population.

One radical change in the realm of women’s activism in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s was the increased acceptance of the label ‘feminist’ by nonwhite women. As feminist thought poured in from the West and was being spread by a growing number of educated South African women, and expansive access to media helped people of all backgrounds to broaden their worldviews, the concept of feminism was increasingly embraced. A key figure of the women’s rights struggle who openly ascribed to feminism was Rozena Maart, a coloured woman

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<sup>76</sup> Mamphela Ramphele, “The Dynamics of Gender within Black Consciousness Organizations: A Personal View” in *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*. Edited by B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana, and L. Wilson. (Brooklyn, Zed Books, 1991) 217.

who first became political in 1982 when she became a member of Cape Town Rape Crisis.<sup>77</sup> She attributed Rape Crisis as being influential in her decision to embrace feminist ideology, but she acknowledged that she had inherited her feminist ways of thinking from the women in her family. As she told Diana Russell, “The women in my family are very strong. My great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother had a feminist conscious long before I even realized what this meant. Their standing up for themselves made a strong impression on me. I was brought up to believe I can do anything I want to do.”<sup>78</sup>

In 1986, Maart, along with four other educated black women, founded Women Against Repression, or WAR--the first specifically feminist organization led by women of color. Maart talked at length about the formation of WAR in the feminist publication “Off Our Backs” in 1989. She said at the time of the group’s inception, “If you were lesbian or gay or trying to forge an awareness of sexuality or feminism or gay rights, you were seen as weird.” Her experience working with victims of rape and sexual violence made clear to her the need for change, and the need for an organization that would focus specifically on women’s rights and gender equality. She said, “A lot of the criticism we used to get was that we shouldn’t use the word ‘feminism’, it’s for white women, we should be more subtle. We felt there’s no point in being subtle any longer--you have to be quite open”.<sup>79</sup> An ideological shift in favor of radical politics and an embracement of feminism by a growing number of women of color, like Maart, had significant impact on politically active women in the 1980s and 90s.<sup>80</sup>

## **Organizations and Formal Feminist Activism**

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<sup>77</sup> Rape Crisis is a feminist organization in South Africa that was created to help rape victims with legal advice and to educate the public on the country’s rape epidemic.

<sup>78</sup> Diana E.H. Russell interview with Maart, 256.

<sup>79</sup> Diana E. H. Russell interview with Maart, 256.

<sup>80</sup> Rozena Maart and Carol Anne Douglas, “International Interview: Black Feminist in South Africa”. *Off Our Backs* vol.19 no. 9 (1989) 1-3.

Female activism and displays of feminism were not limited to a specific group of people. Liberal white women were the demographic most likely to outwardly embrace feminist ideology, while most black women either had no concept of feminist thought or outwardly rejected it as belonging to the enemy--the affluent and oppressive white minority population in the country. However, South African feminism and female activism among the black population were not limited to a specific focus on survival and “bread and butter issues” as Shawn Donaldson, Nompumelelo Motlafi, and Gwendolyn Mikell have heretofore argued. Female issues could be race specific, such as racial segregation under apartheid and misogynistic cultural practices---but issues did not always exist in racial binaries and often times instead transcended racial, geographic, and socioeconomic boundaries. Additionally, not all white women were solely focused on their own issues, but instead took a genuine interest in the issues that plagued their nonwhite sisters and worked diligently to confront many types of gender oppression in the country, even those types by which they were not directly affected.

Scholars who have focused on political activism in the past have predominantly analyzed formal types of organizing.<sup>81</sup> Much focus has been placed on women’s groups such as Federation of South African Women, the Black Sash, and the ANC Women’s League as well as female involvement in public movements and demonstrations, including the anti-pass march and the student protests following the Soweto massacre in 1976. The literature shows that women were present in all large-scale displays of political activism throughout the apartheid era.

All female activism is not feminist in nature, however, and certainly not all politically active women were feminists. For the sake of this paper, I will focus on the formal and informal

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<sup>81</sup> Some examples of these types of work are Shireen Hassim’s *The ANC Women’s League*, Cherry Michelman’s *The Black Sash of South Africa: A Case Study in Liberalism*, and Mary Burton’s *The Black Sash: Women for Justice and Peace*

displays of what I would consider feminist activism--the actions that supported the progression of women's rights and the struggle to elevate the status of South African women in a traditionally patriarchal and unequal society. It is important to identify the many different ways in which women took action to secure their rights to establish a deeper understanding of the wide range of feminist thought and action among the diverse population of South African women.

The 1913 Bloemfontein Anti-Pass Campaign marked the beginning of formal female resistance in the country. The campaign came in response to specifically gendered oppression, and, as such, I consider this demonstration to have been feminist in nature. Passes and employment laws in the Orange Free State--the province in which Bloemfontein is the capital city--heavily restricted the types of employment that nonwhite women could attain. Domestic work--the type of employment most frequently occupied by black women--was regulated by the implementation of required pass books. Sex work and the brewing of alcohol--two occupations also frequently held by women of color--were both illicit, and women caught performing these jobs were frequently arrested and sent to overcrowded and deeply impoverished reserves. Many women complained of physical and sexual abuse by the men arresting them. Shared experiences of abuse, mistreatment, and unfair arrest led hundreds of these women to formally organize, demonstrate, and protest--an impressive feat for women that early in the century. Finally, as a result of the march, the Bantu Women's League was formed, marking the beginning of formal female political organizing in the country.

The Bantu Women's League was the brainchild of Maxeke and women like her who acknowledged that women needed a place in politics to address large societal problems such as systemic racism as well as gender specific issues that plagued women in the country. While the male leaders of groups such as the South African Native National Congress--later to become the

ANC--did not view women as a vital part of the national struggle, both urban and rural women alike were actually developing a political consciousness during the early decades of the twentieth century--an awakening that Maxeke recognized and answered with organizational representation. In the early 1940s, the ANC extended full membership to women, but the Women's League, or, ANCWL, remained a separate entity as many female members believed their rights to be neglected by the ANC.<sup>82</sup>

The 1950s marked a culmination point of resentment toward the government that had been brewing amongst marginalized groups for decades. The rise to power of the National Party in 1948 and subsequent implementation of the apartheid system served as a catalyst for the independence movement, and groups and organizations began forming rapidly to combat the racist and oppressive apartheid regime. Women's groups likewise proliferated in the middle of the century and were quite different than preexisting organizations in the ways that racial cooperation was being displayed on a far greater scale. The most widely influential organizations during this time were the Federation of South African Women, the ANC Women's League, and the Black Sash.

In April of 1954, Ray Simons and a collection of other influential political women such as Helen Joseph and Lillian Ngoyi launched the Federation of South African Women as an answer to the lack of an inclusive multiracial women's organization independent of anti-apartheid organizations. FEDSAW consisted of independent members and affiliated groups and organizations such as the ANCWL, which together created a broad, multiracial membership that truly represented the country's diverse population. The Federation's first conference was attended by one hundred forty-six delegates hailing from across the country's various ethnic

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<sup>82</sup> Shireen Hassim, *The ANC Women's League* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2014). 20-29.

groups, which exemplifies the type of interracial collaboration that was on the rise at the time--a phenomenon under analyzed in historiography. Ruth Mompoti said of this cooperation in a 1987 interview, "Working with all women in the federation enabled us to realize that there were no differences between us as mothers. We were all women. We all had the same anxieties, the same worries. We all wanted to bring up our children to be happy and to protect them from the brutalities of life. This gave us more commitment to fight for unity in our country. It showed us that people of different races could work together well."<sup>83</sup>

At FEDSAW's founding conference, the organization's Women's Charter, a very progressive document with "considerable feminist influence," that also "reflected clearly the conditions of oppressed black people," was presented.<sup>84</sup> The role of the federation was to connect political organizations and individuals who were active in the struggle with a network of groups and activists in order to strengthen the bond between South African women who would transcend racial and ethnic lines. The Women's Charter reinforced this multiracial focus in its objectives, which were "to bring the women of South Africa together to secure full equality of opportunity for all women, regardless of race, colour, or creed...to remove social and legal discrimination and economic exploitation...[and] to work for the protection and empowerment of the women and children of [the] land".<sup>85</sup> The federation's most notable achievement was the 1956 Women's March, which was part of an anti-pass campaign that was spurred by the issuing of passes to women the year previous. More than 20,000 women of all races travelled from across the country to participate in the protest march, showing just how sophisticated and fruitful female political involvement in the country could be. FEDSAW's focus on gender issued independent of

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<sup>83</sup> Diana E.H. Russell interview with Ruth Mompoti, 114.

<sup>84</sup> Joseph autobiography, 28.

<sup>85</sup>Federation of South African Women, *Constitution of the Federation of South African Women*, 1954.



the liberation movement, paired with its emphasis on racial and ethnic inclusivity made the organization extremely progressive. The federation's feminist nature put it way ahead of its time in the realm of female activism in the country.

The Black Sash was founded the year following the inception of FEDSAW, but began as an organization comprised solely of liberal white women, not boasting the same multiculturalism as the federation. The Sash was started as a tea party of a handful of middle-class, liberal, white women in Johannesburg, before expanding to become the Women's Defence of the Constitution League, whose purpose was to oppose discriminatory legislation through protests and vigils. The name was later shortened to Black Sash because of the black sashes the women wore during protests. The sashes were representative of the death of the nation's constitution.<sup>86</sup> The Sash has tackled many unjust laws in the country, including pass laws, voting laws, employment laws, and the death penalty. Although not a specifically women's rights organization, the Sash focused much activism on the advancement of women's rights such as employment opportunities, access to safe and legal abortion, and protection from rape and domestic violence.

While the Black Sash is not a self-identified feminist organization, interviews with past members and the organization's manuscript collection at the University of Cape Town Special Collections Archive can be utilized to trace the evolution of feminist thought, as well as the increasing focus on women's rights. In the 1950s, the Sash became affiliated with the Federation of South African Women and took a stance against the newly implemented pass laws that were restricting black women. The Sash set up a "Bail Fund" to help women who were arrested for violating the pass laws, and many members of the organization participated in the 1956

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<sup>86</sup> "Black Sash" South African History Online. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/black-sash>. (Accessed May 13th, 2019).

Women's March.<sup>87</sup> For the next few decades, however, little attention was paid to women's issues. It was not until the 1980s that gender issues were properly addressed by the organization. The Sash had long taken up an anti-abortion stance, but members in the late 1980s began pushing for "a more comprehensive way" of looking at women's issues.<sup>88</sup> By 1990, they began working closely with the Abortion Reform movement and started circulating pamphlets and newsletters addressing the epidemic of at-home abortions and the dangers that were symptomatic of the practice. Similarly, pamphlets began circulating regarding domestic violence in the country and the oppressive nature of many cultural practices. While topics such as abortion and domestic violence were contentious and sensitive, leaders of the organization at the time, like Mary Burton and Di Bishop, recognized the urgency of these issues because of the countless women who were losing their lives as a result of the lack of proper medical care and the dearth of protection against relationship violence.<sup>89</sup>

By utilizing rarely accessed sources in the Black Sash manuscript collection, I found extensive evidence that Sash members actively discussed feminist ideology during the late 1980s and early '90s. Archival evidence shows an increased interest in feminism and the roles that it played within the organization. Feminist ideology and its relation to South African society was quite ambiguous at the time because of the large disparity in wealth between the white minority population and the non-white majority and the vastly different life experiences of women across

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<sup>87</sup> "History of the Black Sash". Black Sash.org. <https://www.blacksash.org.za/index.php/our-legacy/history-of-the-black-sash> (accessed May 21st, 2019).

<sup>88</sup> Diana E.H. Russell interview with Di Bishop, *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*. (New York, Basic Books, 1989) 215.

<sup>89</sup> Abortion Reform Action Group Newsletter, April 15th, 1993. BC 668. Box 9, Folder 2. Black Sash Collection, University of Cape Town Special Collection Archives, Cape Town, South Africa.

<sup>89</sup> Abortion: A Black Sash Perspective Pamphlet, 1990. BC 668. Box 9, Folder 2. Black Sash Collection, University of Cape Town Special Collection Archives, Cape Town, South Africa.

<sup>89</sup> Abortion: A Matter of Life and Death Pamphlet, August 1992, BC 668, Box 9, Folder 2, Black Sash Collection, University of Cape Town Special Collection Archives, Cape Town, South Africa.

the sociodemographic spectrum. Feminism had long been understood as addressing the problems thought to belong to privileged women, such as pay inequality, sexuality, and bodily autonomy, while black and coloured women were thought to be preoccupied with survival and, therefore, unaffected by the issues plaguing white women. The Sash acknowledged that this notion was over simplistic and that feminism was much more complex than this. Evidence in the Black Sash manuscript collection shows attention being paid to several nuanced definitions of feminism and how they related to the South African experience.

A paper entitled “South African Women’s Studies: An Overview” by Ireen Dubel was presented at a Black Sash orchestrated workshop in 1987, that analyzed interracial involvement in organizations which aimed to “develop a feminism which no longer makes the distinction between so-called Third world feminism and Western feminism.” The paper acknowledged the overlap in female experience between racial groups, such as experiences with abortion, sexual abuse, and oppression of sexuality.<sup>90</sup> An informational newsletter from 1990 details the ways in which “Feminism should be understood as transformational politics” with the goals of “women’s equality, dignity and freedom of choice through women’s power to control [their] own lives and bodies within and outside the home” and “the removal of all forms of inequality, domination, and oppression through the creation of a more just social and economic order.”<sup>91</sup> In the same year, a radio broadcast by The Women’s Group featured an interview with Sash member Suzy Jones who delved into the complexities of feminism, asserting that it was not “a laundry list of women’s issues,” and could not be excluded from politics in the country. She also spoke about the idea of ecofeminism, which addressed “all oppression--the oppression of black

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<sup>90</sup> “South African Women’s Studies: An Overview” BC 668, Box 10, Folder 3, Black Sash Collection, University of Cape Town Special Collection Archives, Cape Town, South Africa.

<sup>91</sup> Feminism as Transformational Politics Newsletter, 1990. BC 668. Box 10, Folder 3. Black Sash Collection, University of Cape Town Special Collection Archives, Cape Town, South Africa.

people by whites, of the Third World by the First, of women by men, of children by adults, of the countryside by the cities, of the ecosystem by industry, of our deepest selves by consumerism”.<sup>92</sup> Groups such as the Black Sash recognized the late 1980s and early 1990s that female oppression needed to be prioritized simultaneously with racial oppression as part of the transition to democracy.

Shireen Hassim, a scholar whose work is at the forefront of South African gender studies, has written extensively on the ANC Women’s League and its place not only in the struggle against apartheid, but also its roles in realizing gender equality and enhanced women’s rights. She considers the League as being feminist in its outlook because of its consistent commitment to equality of the sexes and the notion that “not only could liberation of women not be separated from national liberation, but that it was an integral part of how liberation itself was defined.”<sup>93</sup>

Various issues faced by women in the ANC ensured female members were reluctant to fully merge the Women’s League with the broader ANC to form one cohesive coed organization. Women in the ANC often felt their voices were neglected and their experiences negated by many men in the ANC. Women were also discriminated against by the Congress based on their status as mothers, especially in the militant wing of the organization, Umkhonto we Sizwe, or, MK. Women who were deployed to various camps were forced to get IUDs so that they could not get pregnant while on duty, and many women were left infertile as a result. Those women who did get pregnant were banished and were no longer viewed in many of their male counterparts’ eyes as militant and useful members of the struggle, but instead were reduced to their position as

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<sup>92</sup> “Can Sash Afford Not to Be a Feminist Organization?”, The Women’s Group, Radio Broadcast, Radio Azania, Suzy Jones, 1990. Black Sash Collection, University of Cape Town Special Collections Archive, Cape Town, South Africa.

<sup>93</sup> Shireen Hassim. “Nationalism, Feminism, and Autonomy: The ANC in Exile and the Question of Women”. *Journal of South African Studies*. Vol 30. No 3. (2004). 433.

mothers. MK member Muff Andersson told Shireen Hassim that women feared pregnancy as “there was a slight horror about having children and being sent to Tanzania” because motherhood would restrict participation and mobility within MK.<sup>94</sup> Many women in the League were also subjected to violence and sexual assault by male members of the ANC. and MK. Some women had to sleep with their male superiors in order to get scholarships or promotions within MK. Many times, the men involved in the abuse and mistreatment of their female counterparts in the movement went unpunished.<sup>95</sup> The sexist issues in the ANC served as a type of impetus for the women’s movement, as women banded together and were encouraged and motivated by their shared oppressions to seek out increased rights and protections as women.

The Women’s League worked tirelessly to secure opportunities for women in the anti-apartheid struggle, as well as to promote and achieve increased women’s rights. From 1971, the League had its own magazine--*Voices of Women*--that helped promote feminist thought and forged a connection between politically active women in the country and those in exile at a time when contact with exiled persons could lead to intense punishment. Some members of the ANCWL trained for combat with male members of the movement, and also served in the MK. Others started and ran childcare facilities and educational centers for the children of exiled mothers. Women in the ANCWL took the small opportunities they were afforded to make a difference and actively pursued them. Hassim points out that these opportunities “allowed feminists in the movement to ‘take their rightful place in the struggle’,” paving an avenue for female activism to be both possible and productive.

By the mid-1980s, the concept of feminist was alive, well, and becoming more widely accepted by many female activists of all races. The ANCWL was focusing heavily on ‘the

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<sup>94</sup> Shireen Hassim interview with Muff Anderson, Johannesburg, September 22, 2000.

<sup>95</sup> Hassim, 442.

woman question’--the same question that Charlotte Maxeke and the Bantu Women’s League had prioritized seventy years before. The “woman question” essentially boiled down to how women’s issues and the need for gender equality and liberation of women from their various patriarchal oppressors would be addressed and handled in the broader struggle for national liberation and democracy. The ANCWL declared 1984 ‘Year of the Women in South Africa’ which placed the spotlight on the brave women of the anti-apartheid struggle and began pushing harder for the creation of a cohesive, inclusive national women’s organization, which would ideally utilize the same name and constitution as the earlier Federation of South African Women. A sense of inclusion and cooperation was being revived in the country as prominent members of groups such as the ANCWL pushed for unity and solidarity amongst women of all races, residing both within the country’s borders and in exile.

The 1980s also saw the emergence of smaller scale organizations that self-identified as feminist, such as Rape Crisis and Women Against Repression. Rape Crisis was started in the late 1970s by white feminist, Anne Mayne, in order to help combat the horrific rape epidemic in South Africa. Mayne told Diana Russell in an interview in 1989 that she and many of her colleagues were reluctant to identify as feminist in the early days of Rape Crisis, as many people would consider them “loonies” and not take them seriously. However, Mayne became radicalized the more aware she became of the racial and gendered injustices in the country, and she was personally motivated to work with victims of sexual assault because of her own experiences with gang rape and sexual violence.

Mayne said that by the early 1980s, the organization asserted itself as being specifically feminist, as those who disagreed with the group’s original neutral outlook on feminist ideology decided, “To hell with this! We *are* a feminist organization and we *do* have a feminist

analysis!”.<sup>96</sup> By the time of their 1989 interview, Mayne told Russell that *all* of the organization’s members identified as feminists and that the organization considered its work to be specifically feminist. Rape Crisis addressed national conferences on the country’s rape epidemic, worked to counsel rape victims and provide training to other organizations to equip them to do the same, and started a battered women’s shelter in 1985 to handle domestic violence victims as well. The organization is still in operation and works to alleviate the epidemic of violence against women in the country.

Rozena Maart used the training she received while volunteering for Rape Crisis and her newfound feminist perspective to start the group Women Against Repression, or, WAR, in 1987. The group was radical for its time because of its outspoken stance on feminism and its rejection of capitalism and male domination. Maart also focused on the ways in which people of color and whites could cooperate, even in the world of feminism. She said in a 1989 interview with feminist publication *Off Our Backs*, “There’s a lot of differences between white and Black feminists, but that doesn’t mean we have to exploit our differences, we can exploit our common grounds, that we all identify that a form of male dominance exists and that political activism has to be organized around it.”<sup>97</sup> The types of formal organizing conducted by WAR included picketing, graffiti, and protest marches. One such march, intended to be carried out by up to 35,000 women protesting against the government in 1989, was prohibited by police forces, as the group had not “applied for permission to congregate.” Yet, white supremacists belonging to the Afrikaner Resistance Movement were permitted to carry through with a rally in support of apartheid on the same day in the same space in Pretoria, however.<sup>98</sup> This is but one example of

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<sup>96</sup> Diana E.H. Russell interview with Anne Mayne, *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*. (New York, Basic Books, 1989) 282.

<sup>97</sup> Carol Anne Douglas interview with Maart, 3.

<sup>98</sup> “South Africa: Police Stop Women’s March” *Off Our Backs*. November 1989.

the discrimination placed on formal organizing carried out against the apartheid government before the racist regime's demise.

Political organizations were once again banned following another State of Emergency in 1985, as the government attempted to re-assert total control over the nation as internal and international condemnation of apartheid intensified. The implementation of increased violence and militarization did little to curb resistance, however. Grassroots movements continued to pop up around the country, international governments placed heavy economic sanctions on South Africa, and prominent groups like the ANC and United Democratic Front (UDF) worked to make the country "ungovernable."<sup>99</sup> It became clear by the late '80s that the system of apartheid was becoming quickly nonviable in the face of a crippled economy and widespread unrest. In 1989, the country's prime minister, PW Botha, resigned and was succeeded by FW de Klerk, who subsequently lifted the ban on political parties such as the ANC and released political prisoners including Nelson Mandela, actions that shocked South Africa and the world.

As negotiations began for the country's transition to an inclusive democracy, women were generally absent in the decision-making process. Prominent female activists acknowledged the need for a female political body that would represent women's issues so that they were not overlooked during the drafting of a new constitution. Women active in organizations like the ANC had recognized the need to prioritize the needs of women within the independence movement so they were not further marginalized when independence was achieved. Now that democratization was no longer just a hypothetical but rather a proximate reality, women began

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98 "South Africa Prohibits Women's March" Sun Sentinel, November, 1989.

99 "The End of Apartheid". US Department of State Archive. <https://www.2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/pcw/98678.htm> (Accessed June 12th, 2019)



taking concrete action toward forming a political body through which they could voice their concerns as the country underwent the transition to democracy.

In 1992, the Women's National Coalition was formed to act as a representative body for the diverse population of South African women. The coalition was comprised of an impressive seventy women's organizations, from across the racial and ideological spectrums. Women belonging to every race, ethnicity, class, religion, political party, and sexual orientation were represented by the WNC, which illustrates how inclusivity was not only attainable, but could actually thrive, even in a country that long featured deep, systematic divides between groups. I believe the WNC to be indicative of the existence of gender consciousness across the masses of South African women, as well as an element of "sisterhood" that has been long overlooked in the historiography. Many feminist scholars such as Ranjoo Seodu Herr have also stressed that the concept of sisterhood is unlikely to transcend boundaries between wealthy white women and impoverished women of color.<sup>100</sup> However, the Coalition operated on a sense of solidarity among women owing to their shared patriarchal oppression, while also acknowledging the many ways in which South African women were different from one another, embracing and prioritizing those differences.

Through the utilization of interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups, the WNC was able to identify the major areas in which women were negatively affected. The WNC placed its focus on five strategic issues that plagued South African women: legal status; land ownership; healthcare; violence against women; and employment rights. The Coalition knew the entirety of the female population of the country could not be dealt with as one cohesive unit. as male political leaders attempted to do; and rather, the particularities of each group must be given

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<sup>100</sup> Herr, 4-5.

proper focus. The WNC drafted a Women's Charter for Effective Equality that was presented to Parliament in August of 1994 and subsequently approved by delegates from over ninety political organizations. The preamble to the Charter is a perfect example of the multiracial cooperation and feminist consciousness of the Coalition:

We, the women of South Africa, wives and mothers, working women and housewives, African, Indians, European, and Coloured, hereby declare our aim of striving for the removal of all laws, regulations, conventions and customs that discriminate against us as women, and that deprive us in any way or our inherent right to the advantages, responsibilities, and opportunities that society offers to any one section of the population.<sup>101</sup>

The inclusiveness of the Women's Charter, as well as its success in Parliament, goes to demonstrate how South African women were able to put aside their differences in order to confront their various oppressors, and to work in solidarity to ensure that they had an equal, fair place in society following transition.

Many activists in South Africa were finally accepting the label "feminist", especially following a seminar held by the ANCWL in London in 1989 regarding 'Feminism and National Liberation'. Even prominent political women, such as Frene Ginwala, who had long rejected the feminist label, vocally embraced feminism and began working to ensure that gender oppression was addressed during the transition. Ginwala and other activists utilized the Women's National Coalition to address feminist concerns and ensure they were given their deserved attention during the negotiation process. The Coalition was successful, as women's issues were prioritized during negotiation and consequent legislation was passed regarding employment, abortion, legal status, rape, and violence against women. The heavy involvement of the WNC in the democratic

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<sup>101</sup> "The Women's Charter" South African History Online. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/womens-charter> (Accessed June 1st, 2019)

transition illustrates how critical a role women played in the process, although their involvement remains largely overlooked in relevant literature.<sup>102</sup>

### **Informal Displays of Feminism**

Women's organizations made great strides in the struggle for women's rights in the 20th century. Many influential women became respected leaders during this time and worked to draw focus to the gendered injustices affecting South African women of all different backgrounds. Many of these women and the organizations to which they belonged are well documented in the literature, even though they are less represented than their male counterparts and the overarching anti-apartheid struggle. Women's groups were largely important in the way they pushed to rectify gender inequality, yet agency and resistance were not limited to formal organizations and activists. The broader population of South African women that these organizations represented are generally missing from these narratives, however. Scholars have generally neglected to place focus on the day-to-day instances of resistance by South African women, especially women of color. These women are portrayed as being passive victims of their sexist, patriarchal cultures, unable to attain independence, autonomy, or agency. Contrary to this notion, however, evidence in interviews with these women shows that many were not compliant with sexist oppression, and instead found ways in their daily lives to combat the injustices that they suffered.

It is important to pay attention to the day-to-day experiences of the millions of black, coloured, and Indian women that often fall through the cracks in literature regarding apartheid South Africa, because their stories are far more indicative of the South African female experience than the few women who were able to gain public recognition for their involvement in the anti-apartheid movement and the struggle for women's rights. While the voices of these

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<sup>102</sup> "Gendered Citizenship: South Africa's Democratic Transition and the Construction of a Gendered State" *Gender and Society* vol 13, no 3. (1999) 290-291.

women have long been silenced by cultural sexism, patriarchal governmental structures, and historians and researchers who have negated the importance of their experiences, archival evidence such as the Women's Movement for Peace collection at the University of Cape Town and oral testimonies in books such as Mark Mathabane's *African Women: Three Generations* and Patricia Romero's *Profiles in Diversity: Women in the New South Africa* can be pieced together to craft a more comprehensive narrative of the herstory of South Africa. With this evidence it becomes apparent that feminism was not something that solely existed at the organizational level or on university campuses, but instead was alive and well in places like the overcrowded townships and remote homelands in which most people of color lived.

Analyses of South African feminism are typically centered around women on university campuses, women who were politically active, and white upper-class women who have long been vocal about economic inequality and the need for bodily autonomy. It is difficult to conceptualize the ways in which extremely marginalized women of color who were struggling to feed their families found ways to take part in activities that could be deemed as feminist. Some scholars, such as Shawn Riva Donaldson, have helped to expand the definition of feminism in South Africa by examining these marginalized groups and the ways in which the women stood up for themselves in the face of extreme systemic and traditional sexism. In her study entitled "'Our Women Keep Our Skies from Falling': Women's Networks and Survival Imperatives in Tshunyane, South Africa," Donaldson uses the example of female experience in the Bophuthatswana homeland as a microcosm of South African feminism. The women who resided in Tshunyane were heavily victimized by the triple yoke of oppression in the way they suffered at the hands of extreme poverty, systemic racism, and cultural sexism.

Bophuthatswana, the homeland encapsulating the community of Tshunyane, is a typical example of African homelands under apartheid. Communities in the homeland were extremely overcrowded, with the average household consisting of ten people, while nearly 90% of the population were unemployed. Job opportunities, food, and medical care were all very scarce. The people living in communities like these had all odds stacked against them, and women were even further marginalized because of their gender. For the purpose of her study, Donaldson focuses on the ways in which Tswana women living in Tshunyane made important medical decisions for themselves and their children and created amongst themselves a network of women to aid in finding adequate medical care. She defines these acts of female solidarity as being feminist in nature, illustrating the fact that even informal, seemingly small acts of agency and female cooperation can constitute feminist activity.<sup>103</sup>

People living in homelands were frequently malnourished as a result of the overwhelming lack of resources in these areas. Crops and livestock were incredibly difficult to maintain as Tshunyane was largely arid and infertile. A lack of proper nutrition left communities like this susceptible to disease, especially those individuals with the weakest immune systems, including children, pregnant women, and the elderly. Many women in the community were left to make medical decisions for the members of their households, as most able-bodied men worked in other parts of the country and were not available to support their wives and children on a regular basis. An extreme lack of access to Western medicine combined with the high costs of hospital visits and medications left women in a difficult position when making medical decisions for their families. Tswana women typically had little power over themselves or their children because of

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<sup>103</sup> Shawna Riva Donaldson, ““Our Women Keep our Skies From Falling”: Women’s Network and Survival Imperatives in Tshunyane, South Africa,” in *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Gwendolyn Mikell (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997),

their legal position as minors as well as their subordinate position to their fathers and husbands as a result of the sexist cultural practice of *lobola* marriages.<sup>104</sup>

Women in Tshunyanane subtly combatted these patriarchal traditions by creating informal medical support networks among women in their community. Medical support networks helped women in a number of different ways. Women in the communities would help each other decide when traditional medicine would suffice for an ailment or when Western medicine was necessary. They helped arrange for transportation to the hospital, as it was difficult to access for a woman trying to get there on her own. They also helped to raise money for medical procedures and medication. Although women were largely stripped of decision-making powers by their position of legal subordination, they still found ways to organize informally in female solidarity in order to make important medical decisions for their households. Judith Stevenson analyzed the ways in which Tswana women in the township of Munsieville outside of Johannesburg also combatted patriarchal oppression and worked to carve out influential spaces for themselves as women and as mothers. She asserts that as Feminist Contextual Theology spread in the 1980s, black women in the township began to identify “a space wherein they were able to reclaim their traditional roles as public decision-makers, leaders, and actors.”<sup>105</sup> Scholars like Donaldson and

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<sup>104</sup> *Lobola* marriages, or bridewealth marriages, were common amongst the various African cultural groups in South Africa. *Lobola* was frequently constituted of cash or livestock and was paid to a bride’s family in exchange for their daughter. While the traditional intention of *lobola* was for two families to be brought together by marriage to expand wealth and support for both families, the actual practice was rarely fruitful and instead led to countless cases of domestic abuse and sexual violence as men exerted their authority over their wives who were their essential property. Once women married into a *lobola* marriage, they had very few legal rights over themselves or their children, as custody and decision making power belonged to their husbands instead.

<sup>105</sup> Judith Stevenson “”The Mamas Were Ripe” Ideologies of Motherhood and Public Resistance in a South African Township” *Feminist Formations* 23 (2011): 135.

Stevenson help to expand our understanding of informal feminist activism and female support networks that existed outside of formal organizations<sup>106</sup>

Much like the rural homelands, townships on the outskirts of urban areas were plagued by issues of overcrowding, lack of resources, and the mistreatment of women. Issues of rape, domestic violence, unequal educational opportunities, infidelity, and abandonment were daily experienced by women in the townships. Employment opportunities were scarce, and many men went to the cities to work, leaving their wives and children without financial support or protection. The daily experiences of township women were frequently cruel and gruesome with little hope for improvement as legal and cultural sexism seemed inescapable.

As in Bophuthatswana, women in townships such as Langa and Soweto were objectified and controlled by the cultural practice of *lobola* marriage. An interested man would pay a bride price, usually in cash in the case of the townships, and his chosen woman would transition from being her father's property to that of her new husband. Families would frequently sell their daughters to men who they knew to be violent gangsters and abusers, because they were so desperate for money and their daughter was likely their most valuable commodity. Families could ask for higher lobola for daughters who were virgins, had docile and passive personalities, or had large breasts.<sup>107</sup> The practice of customary marriage was largely impersonal, and often times left women susceptible to mistreatment by their husbands because they had no legal protections over themselves and were largely viewed as being second-class citizens or mere property.

The world could seem very bleak to the women living in controlling and frequently abusive customary marriages, and few options for personal liberation from these situations

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<sup>106</sup> Donaldson, 267-270.

<sup>107</sup> Mark Mathabane. *African Women: Three Generations*. (New York City, Harper Collins, 1994). 29.

existed. While a woman could choose to leave her marriage, she would have to leave her children with her husband as she had no legal rights to custody. Also, many women faced the threat of rape, physical abuse, or murder if they chose to leave a marriage with an abusive partner. Many women refused to merely accept their situations without standing up for themselves, however. On the experiences of his mother and sister, author Mark Mathabane recounts, “Though belonging to different generations, both had been purchased by men following the lobola custom, after which the men changed, and the relationships turned oppressive and abusive. With no knowledge of Western feminism or law, my mother and sister instinctively refused to accept their inferior status and degradation as women, and they fought doggedly for their rights as they understood them to be.”<sup>108</sup> Mathabane acknowledges that feminist behaviors can exist without knowledge of or ascription to feminist ideology. The firsthand accounts of heavily oppressed African women are littered with examples of feminist thoughts and actions with which women attempted to improve their personal situations as well as the lives of the women in their communities.

Customary marriages were frequently traumatic for the women involved. They had to blindly obey their husbands regardless of their own feelings and opinions. Women were left vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases owing to both common polygamist practices in which men took on multiple wives, as well as infidelity outside of monogamous marriages. Legal minor status and a lack of protection by the law for marital rape made women afraid or unable to deny their husbands sexual intercourse, oftentimes without a condom. Marriage, as problematic and oppressive as it often was, remained a necessity for black women, however. Florah Mathabane said of marriage, “Apartheid had put so many obstacles in the path of single black women

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<sup>108</sup> Mathabane, xiii.



fighting for survival in the cities that we could do practically nothing without men. We needed men to do just about everything concerned with the law. We needed them to get permits to look for jobs, to qualify for housing, to register children in school, [and] to open bank accounts.”<sup>109</sup>

Florah, like many other black women in her situation, still resisted the oppressive practices of customary marriage and polygamy, however. She refused to marry her second husband unless he agreed to marry her through the courts and make their marriage valid in the eyes of the law, rather than just engaging in a customary marriage in which she would have no legal rights over her young daughter and under which she would be at a higher risk for relationship violence.

Similar to the Tshunyanne example, women in the townships built “informal support network(s) among black women united by common problems and abuse.”<sup>110</sup> Although many of the men in their communities abused and controlled them, and the apartheid government restricted their mobility and employment opportunities, women in the townships banded together to find feasible solutions to their problems. Many women, like Florah and Mark Mathabane’s mother Geli, resisted being fully financially dependent on their husbands as they were expected to be. Many men were threatened by economic independence and were not supportive of their wives working enough to support themselves. She recounts, “I had never felt happier in my life than when my spinach business flourished and I no longer had to rely on Jackson for anything. I prayed every night that he should never find out. I shuddered at what he would do if he ever found out.”<sup>111</sup> Geli and many women like her still took risks and began working side jobs that they kept a secret from their husbands, so that they could enhance their lives and stop living a

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<sup>109</sup> Mathabane, 116.

<sup>110</sup> Mathabane, 94.

<sup>111</sup> Mathabane, 141.

lifestyle in which they had to dig through garbage for food scraps or send their children to school repeatedly in dirty clothes and shoes with holes in them.

In an effort to support themselves financially in order to escape crippling poverty and male economic domination, women in townships would take up side jobs as street vendors and beer brewers. Geli Mathabane told her son, “I was willing to do anything for my own income”.<sup>112</sup> With advice from a neighbor, she began travelling by foot to a farm to pick spinach and sell it in her community in an effort to support her family, despite her husband’s reckless spending habits, alcoholism, and gambling addiction. Many other women took up the practice of beer brewing and opened *shebeens*, or illegal breweries. Although they risked arrest for operating illicit businesses, the women that ran these breweries--or, *shebeen* queens--felt the risk was worth the reward of financial independence and a level of power and autonomy they would not typically be afforded otherwise.

Dr. Maki Motapanyane has written on the ways that feminism has exhibited itself amongst working class women of color in South Africa, both during the apartheid era and in the subsequent years. She is critical of the historiographical neglect of informal feminism in the country and feminist consciousness amongst the masses, phenomena sidelined in exchange for the heightened focus on formal organization and activism. When exclusive focus is placed on formal resistance and action, much of the population goes unexamined, leaving a large gap in the understanding of gender consciousness and feminist thought amongst the many different groups that constitute South African society. Though primary source evidence is slim, and the literature focusing on informal feminism even more narrow, Motapanyane asserts that feminism did in fact exist among the masses, as evidenced by the many informal networks constructed between poor

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<sup>112</sup> Mathabane, 136.

and working class women to address their specifically gendered oppression.<sup>113</sup> More attention must be paid to the lived experiences of the working class women that made up the brunt of South African society to create a more fully encompassing herstory of feminism and feminist consciousness in the country.

Women of color across South Africa were subtly challenging patriarchal, sexist forms of oppression in their everyday lives. From the homelands in the rural north to the townships outside of metropolises like Cape Town and Johannesburg, women found ways to protect themselves from male domination while also creating intricate informal support networks based on their shared experiences of gendered oppression. Oral testimonies, biographies, and archival sources all evince the many ways women took action against various oppressors, contesting the overarching depiction of women as passive and subordinate actors in the country's political history.

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<sup>113</sup> J. Maki Motapanyane, 19-22.

## Chapter Three

### **Women's Legal Rights Influences of Activism on Legislation**

To properly gauge the effectiveness of feminist activism in South Africa, it is important to look at legislation achieved for women's rights in the country as concrete evidence of the successes of these women and organizations. While informal examples of feminism and female cooperation can be quite difficult to track and measure in terms of success, formal organizing geared toward codifying women's rights in law is more easily traced and its success or failure more easily proven. Legislation surrounding women's issues such as pass requirements, violence against women, and access to abortion evinces the successes of activists and groups that worked to enhance the position of women in South African society. Women's rights activism forever changed the legal landscape for women in the country, and female activists were crucial in the struggle against gender oppression.

#### **Pass Laws**

The earliest instance of widescale female organizing and the spread of feminist thought was the 1913 Bloemfontein Anti-Pass Campaign. In 1906, the government had begun to crack down on existing pass laws, enforcing them to a far greater degree than they had previously. Unrest spread throughout black and coloured communities in the Orange Free State province. Black women in Bloemfontein were inspired to take political action against the racist pass laws following a local meeting of the South African Natives National Congress, the predecessor of the African National Congress. They began passing out petitions throughout the Orange Free State, and were able to obtain over 5,000 signatures. Six women representing the masses went to meet with the Minister of Native Affairs in order to present the petition and to assert their belief that

the pass laws “were designed to make women feel inferior.”<sup>114</sup> These women were not taken seriously, however, and were labeled as terrorists. Widespread arrests for pass law violations continued, and in June hundreds of women gathered at City Hall in Bloemfontein and protested the pass laws. Resistance to these laws spread throughout the province, with similar campaigns popping up in other towns as well. Unfortunately, the government refused to make any meaningful changes to pass laws at the time. However, this widescale resistance of black and coloured women was impressive for its time and set a precedent for the types of activism that women would adopt in the coming decades against a host of other evils.

Forty years later, women from across South Africa would again take a stand against passes, but on a far larger scale. Leaders of prominent groups such as FEDSAW and the ANCWL met in 1956 in Pretoria to plan widescale resistance against compulsory passes that had been issued to African women since the year previous. Helen Joseph recalled being “nearly paralyzed with shock” as the other women spoke of organizing a protest of twenty thousand multiracial women.<sup>115</sup> However, in August of the same year, over twenty thousand women of all races came from across the country by car, bus, and train to Pretoria to protest. The leaders of the movement attempted to deliver thousands of written protests to the prime minister’s office, but he was not there, so the women instead dumped them on the floor and Lillian Ngoyi exclaimed to the masses, “The Prime Minister was not there, he has run from the women!”<sup>116</sup> Lillian then called for thirty minutes of silent protest, and “twenty thousand arms went up and stayed for thirty minutes.”<sup>117</sup> The display was groundbreaking in the realm of women’s rights, and the

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<sup>114</sup> “The 1913 Women’s Anti-Pass Campaign in the Orange Free State” South African History Online. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/1913-womens-anti-pass-campaign-orange-free-state> (accessed May 1st, 2019).

<sup>115</sup> Diana E. H. Russell interview with Helen Joseph, 208.

<sup>116</sup> Diana E. H. Russell interview with Helen Joseph, 210.

<sup>117</sup> Diana E. H. Russell interview with Helen Joseph, 211.

fervor for activism spread throughout the country, with anti-pass campaigns springing up across the South Africa following the march. The actions of these women were more successful than their predecessors in Bloemfontein decades before, and they were able to stave off the implementation of compulsory pass laws on women for another seven years.

The day of this historic march, August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1956, is to this day is celebrated as National Women's Day in South Africa, as the country continues to commemorate the mass scale political activism and courage of its women against the oppressive hand of the apartheid government. However, regardless of the impressiveness of this large-scale female political involvement, little scholarship exists on the topic in comparison to the scholarship that has been published on male political activism and the actions of the ANC and its male leaders. One of the most notable books in the historiography of this period is *Boycotts, Buses, and Passes* by Pamela E. Brooks, which analyzes the parallels that exist between the political activism of black women in the United States and South Africa in the twentieth century; however, little has been written on this activism in its own right rather than as a comparison to either international movements or male led movements in South Africa.<sup>118</sup>

## **Abortion**

Abortion has been a contentious topic in South Africa since the 1800s, though the legality of abortion was generally ambiguous throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As abortion was increasingly criminalized in the metropole, laws regarding the practice also became prevalent in the colonies, and the first official legislation to address abortion was the Native Territories Penal Code of 1886, which outlined punishment for people who attempted or successfully completed an abortion on themselves or someone else. According to the Act,

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<sup>118</sup> Brooks, 168-181.

“Whoever causes the death of any living child, which has not proceeded in a living state from the body of its mother, in such a manner that he would have been guilty of murder if such child had been fully born, shall be punished with imprisonment with or without hard labour for a term which may extend to seven years or with fine or both.”<sup>119</sup> The Act included four articles relating to abortion and its consequences, but it applied only to the Transkei and not the colony as a whole. It was not until 1975 that a statute defining abortion was written into legislation.<sup>120</sup>

The Abortion and Sterilization Act of 1975 legally defined abortion and set parameters to determine when and by whom an abortion could be legally procured. The primary motivation for drafting the Act were the enormous numbers of women who were becoming ill or dying as a result of complications from abortions they had attempted on themselves or obtained from a clandestine abortion provider. By the 1960s, over 100,000 women were procuring unsafe abortions each year. The Act stated that abortion may only be procured from a qualified medical practitioner and only in the case that the birth of the fetus would cause harm to the women’s physical or mental health, if the baby would be born deformed, or if the pregnancy was a result of rape or incest.<sup>121</sup>

Though the Act did set boundaries on abortion in the country and established consequences for those who did not adhere to the law, the rate of women seeking out abortions failed to decline. Affluent white women who had the means to do so traveled as far as London or Amsterdam to obtain safe and legal abortions. However, many poor women across the racial

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<sup>119</sup> South Africa, Cape of Good Hope Legislature. *Native Territories’ Penal Code of 1886*. Cape Town. 1886. Accessed November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018. [policehumanrightsresources.org/2016/03](http://policehumanrightsresources.org/2016/03).

<sup>120</sup> Susanne M. Klausen, *Abortion Under Apartheid: Nationalism, Sexuality, and Women’s Reproductive Rights in South Africa*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>121</sup> South Africa. Parliament. *Abortion and Sterilization Act 2 of 1975*. Cape Town. 1975. Accessed November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018. <https://srhr.org/abortion-policies/documents/countries/01-Abortion-and-Sterilization-Act-1975>

spectrum were forced to either attempt to self-abort at home through the ingestion of herbs and poisons or the insertion of foreign objects such as umbrella spokes into the cervix. Those who did not attempt to self-abort sought out both traditional healers or secretive abortion providers who would use many of these same techniques to perform abortions, often in unsanitary conditions and without the means to combat injuries, related illnesses, or sepsis. These negative health consequences claimed the lives of thousands of South African women a year.<sup>122</sup>

Male leaders in the ANC, female activists of all socio-demographic backgrounds, and medical professionals all acknowledged the need for a change in abortion legislation. The deaths resulting from illegal abortions in the country had become a public health epidemic, which influenced many doctors to support legalized elective abortion as a way to curb the maternal death rate. Aside from the health concerns of unsafe and illegal abortion, liberal attitudes regarding abortion and a woman's right to body autonomy were flowing in from the West, inspiring groups of female activists such as the ANC Women's League and even members of more conservative groups such as the Black Sash. South Africa saw an influx in public support of legalized abortion and feminist activism regarding the need for access to safe and affordable legal abortions.

Black Sash member Di Bishop acknowledged that while the leadership of the organization officially condemned abortion, many members were in support of more liberal abortion legislation and that "women's issues [should be] addressed in a more comprehensive way."<sup>123</sup> Hettie V., an Afrikaner feminist from Cape Town, told Diane E. H. Russell in an interview that she and many other feminists were in support of legalized abortion, but that she

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<sup>122</sup> Rebecca Hodes. "Journal of African Studies" The Culture of Legal Abortion in South Africa. Vol. 42, 1 (2016): 80-83

<sup>123</sup> Interviewee Di Bishop. "The Black Sash: White Women Confront Apartheid". Interviewed by Diane E. H. Russell. *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*. 1989.



worried that if white feminists tried to take up the issue it would be viewed as cultural dominance over the black population, whom she thought was “quite conservative about things like this, and quite religious.”<sup>124</sup> However, men and women alike in the ANC were vocal about their support for abortion legislation, asserting that the legality of women’s reproductive rights and access to abortion was crucial in freeing them from their oppression and forced subordination, and that women’s rights were completely necessary for the establishment of a true and equal democratic state. Women in the ANC who received unequal treatment within the organization as well as within society because of their status as mothers were especially supportive of reformed laws regarding abortion.<sup>125</sup>

The law regarding abortion was not officially changed until after the first democratic elections following the end of apartheid. South Africa’s constitution proved to be a very socially liberal document, as the ANC government attempted to wipe the historical slate of oppression clean and extend rights to all of society, even the most marginalized. On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1996, the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy act of 1996 took effect, and extended the legality of abortions to include elective procedures- without question before thirteen weeks gestation, and abortion in the second trimester so long as the mother could prove extenuating circumstances, including risk of health of the mother, deformation or terminal illness of the fetus, and financial hardship. The law also expanded who was allowed to perform abortions, granting nurses the ability to perform abortions in the first trimester.

Following the passing of this legislation, South Africa featured some of the most liberal abortion laws in the world, which was an enormous victory for feminist activists in the country.

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<sup>124</sup> Interviewee Hettie V. “An Afrikaner Rebels”. Interviewed by Diane E. H. Russel. *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*. 1989

<sup>125</sup> Cathy Albertyn. “Revista Direito GV” *Claiming and Defending Abortion Rights in South Africa*, Vol. 11, No 2. 2015. 1-4

However, increased legality of abortion did not translate into a noticeable decrease in the use of dangerous, illegal abortion practices. A lack of reproductive education, a dearth of providers willing to perform the procedure, mistreatment of abortion patients by medical professionals, and social taboos still drive tens of thousands of women to self-abort or to use “back-alley” abortion services annually in South Africa. These unsafe, clandestine practices still cause many deaths today, despite abortion being one of the safest medical practices in the world when performed correctly. The country still has a long way to go for abortion to be a widely accepted and accessible procedure.<sup>126</sup>

### **Violence Against Women**

Women in South Africa have historically faced and continue to face gender-based violence in many forms, including physical and mental abuse by employers, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. The country has many times been dubbed the “rape capital of the world,” a tragedy most comprehensively outlined in Pumla Dineo Gqola’s *Rape: A South African Nightmare*, which analyzes a number of high-profile cases such as that of former president Jacob Zuma, while also exploring the expansive causes of sexual violence and other types of violence against women, or, VAW, in the country. Gqola’s book challenges several existing misconceptions of rape culture in South Africa, asserting that it is not a product of post-apartheid society and actually traces its roots to Cape slavery, and that there is a direct correlation between racialized violence and sexual violence, and rape committed against nonwhite women. Violence against women has been pervasive in South African society throughout the country’s history, and it has historically transcended race and class lines.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Hodes, 87.

<sup>127</sup> Pumla Dineo Gqola. *Rape: A South African Nightmare*. (ebook. Jacana Media, 2016).

Prior to 1986, women in South Africa were legally considered minors and remained under the essential ownership of their fathers, male family members, and husbands for the entirety of their lives. This practice was common in customary and tribal law but was perpetuated by nationwide parliamentary law as well. Aside from gender-based legal inequalities such as the inability to own land, file lawsuits, or have legal custody of children, the legal minor status objectified women and classified them as second-class citizens not only in the eyes of the law, but also in the eyes of African men. The patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes that were cultivated from this unfair gender-based legal classification are largely to blame for the commonplace occurrence of violence against women both under the apartheid regime and since the democratization of the country.

Historiographically, little attention has been paid to the correlation between widespread mistreatment and abuse of women and increased feminist activism. However, the creation of various formal organizations and informal examples of feminist activism were on the rise in the latter half of the twentieth century. Rape Crisis was created by feminist activists in 1976, making it “the oldest organization in South Africa supporting the recovery of survivors, seeking justice, and making change in communities”.<sup>128</sup> Rape Crisis offered legal advice and other resources for women who had been victims of sexual abuse, as well as training and group seminars for anti-apartheid activists across the country who were beginning to embrace feminism and recognize women’s rights as integral for the success of the anti-apartheid movement and a truly fair democratic state.

Individual feminist acts and informal ways that women exhibited their agency after experiencing abuse are obvious in the various memoirs of South African women who emerged

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<sup>128</sup> “About Us”. Rape Crisis.org. <https://rapecrisis.org.za/about-us> (retrieved November 27th, 2018).

following the apartheid era, such as *The Calling of Katie Makanya: A Memoir of South Africa* by Margaret McCord and *African Women: Three Generations* by best-selling South African author Mark Mathabane. Mathabane's book is comprised of interviews with his grandmother, mother, and sister, all three of whom recount instances of relationship violence by their partners. Flora, Mathabane's sister, puts off marrying a man in whom she is interested, worrying that he will abuse her once her father pays *lobola*, or, bride wealth, and she legally becomes his property. Flora and Mark had frequently seen their mother physically abused by their father who spent all of his earnings from work on gambling and alcohol. In response, their mother began brewing beer and selling it to neighbors and workers in their town in order to make her own money to put food on the table and be free of the financial oppression and hardship brought on by her husband, a practice that was quite common during this time. Flora's refusal to get married and transfer power to the man she was dating, and her mother's secret side job are both examples of the ways women in South Africa faced their adversity head on and began to take agency and control their futures.<sup>129130</sup>

The two major pieces of legislation passed that protected South African women from relationship violence and sexual abuse were the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998 and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act no. 32 of 2007. The Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998 states that:

[D]omestic violence is a serious social evil; that there is a high incident of domestic violence within South African society; that victims of domestic violence are among the most vulnerable members of society; that domestic violence takes on many forms; that acts of domestic violence may be committed in a wide range of domestic relationships; and that the remedies currently available to the victims of domestic violence have proved to be ineffective.

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<sup>129</sup> Margaret McCord, *The Calling of Katie Makanya: A Memoir of South Africa* (New York, John Wiley and Sons Publishing, 1995)

<sup>130</sup> Mark Mathabane, *African Women: Three Generations*, (New York, Harper Collins, 1994)

This comprehensive approach to domestic violence provided a much broader definition of domestic violence than had previously existed and made illegal a variety of acts that had previously been undefined by the law as domestic violence. The Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act established a more broadly encompassing definition of sexual offences than had previously existed. The Act lays out the legal definitions and correlating consequences for rape, sexual assault, bestiality, incest, sexual acts with a corpse, sexual violence against children, child pornography, and sexual offences against mentally and physically disabled persons. Additionally, the law instituted compulsory HIV testing for all alleged sex offenders.

Although both of these acts of legislation afforded women far more legal rights in terms of VAW, there continues to be an epidemic of violent crime against women in South Africa. The widespread occurrence and normalization of relationship and sexual violence can be traced back to Cape slavery, which featured the emasculation of African men and misconception of hypersexuality of African women. Following the abolition of Cape slavery, women became legal minors, and men were given the freedom of ownership over their women and children—something they had not been afforded under slavery. This newfound freedom often caused men to act in hypermasculine ways, often in acts of dominance over the women in their lives. This, paired with widely prevalent rape and sexual violence against nonwhite women, laid a framework of toxic masculinity and detrimental exaggerated patriarchy and misogyny in the country. This history, along with legal leniency towards perpetrators and seemingly perpetually corrupt government and law enforcement are largely to blame for the continued culture of violence against women in South Africa.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Scully, 28-29.

## Employment

Most South African women of color work in the domestic sphere and have for the entirety of the country's history. Under the apartheid regime, women were restricted to the types of work they could obtain by various pass laws over the years, resettlement to rural areas with little or no economic opportunity, and racially biased economic sectors in urban areas. Whereas many coloured women worked in retail and restaurants within urban areas during the apartheid regime, black women typically lacked the education levels required for these positions, resigning them to domestic labor. Public education was extremely poor and largely ineffective, and higher quality schools were often not an option for blacks. Many schools excluded blacks and other people of color on the basis of race or had entrance exams that would have been nearly impossible for black South Africans to pass given the subpar education they were provided as children. Even when formally educated, many employers in the public sector refused jobs to black women. Brewing beer, which was largely illegal in the townships, was a common way for women to make money, though it was risky and could carry fines or jail time. Because of the many restrictions on black women's employment, they were forced into the domestic sphere and worked for meager wages and often in mentally and physically abusive situations.<sup>132</sup>

Domestic workers prior to the end of apartheid were in a "legal vacuum" because they were not protected by any labor laws. There was no established minimum wage for them, and many went unpaid for long periods of time and did not have the legal right to sue for the wages that they had earned. The Wehahn Commission, established in 1977, was created to analyze the legality of labor legislation. The commission did have an interest in women's rights and made

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<sup>132</sup> Interviewee Nomonde Siyaka. Interviewed by Amber Lenser. June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018

<sup>132</sup> Mathabane, 247-252

suggestions for higher wages and maternity leave for female workers including those in domestic jobs, though these suggestions were never followed during apartheid. Feminist activists such as Ray Alexander, who was one of the founders of the Federation of South African Women (FASW), helped to instill a feminist consciousness in working class women in South Africa as she vocalized the need for better pay and working conditions for women as well as the need for women to collectivize to vie for their employment rights.<sup>133</sup>

The Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 instituted a policy of equal work/equal pay regardless of gender. There remains, however, large income disparities between the genders, with women making on average 27% less than men. This is attributable to the fact that many black South African women remain in subpar employment positions and in jobs that pay very little, as a result of little opportunity for different types of jobs or for advancement. Education is still difficult for women of color to obtain for many reasons, including the cost of uniforms and fees being unaffordable to many poor families, and a common cultural notion among some South African ethnicities that females are in less need of an education than their male counterparts. Female employees, especially black and coloured women, still have a long road ahead to achieve acceptable pay in relation to the jobs they work.<sup>134</sup>

South African women have long been the victims of gendered oppression, with the worst of the mistreatment and discrimination falling on South African women of color who are oppressed not only because of their gender, but also because of their race and class. Over the course of the twentieth century and into the modern day, South African women have overcome

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<sup>133</sup> Judith Nolde. "Third World Legal Studies" South African Women Under Apartheid: Employment Rights, with Particular Focus on Domestic Service and Forms of Resistance to Promote Change. Vol. 10. No. 1.

<sup>134</sup> Helena Roodt "The Wage War: Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value" Polity.org.  
<https://www.polity.org/za/article/the-wage-war-equal-pay-for-work-of-equal-value-2018-02-02>

an impressive array of obstacles to obtain increased political rights to protect themselves as equal citizens rather than legal minors, as employees, and as women who are constantly at risk for domestic and sexual violence. Because the historiography of this period largely focuses on South African male political activists and their achievements, or views women simply as lesser important actors in male-run organizations such as the ANC, it is important to include women's struggles for their own gender specific rights, independent of the nationalist anti-apartheid movement. The legislation that is culminative of female activism in the country provides insight into to the successes of the women's rights movement and helps to paint South African women as heroes of their own story, instead of as passive, secondary figures in their society and in the anti-apartheid movement.



## Chapter Four

### **Lasting Impacts: The Female Experience in the Post-Apartheid Era**

The work of the Women's National Coalition in the early 1990s and the drafting of the South African Constitution in 1994 paved the way for a far more liberal and progressive society. Groups that had long been marginalized--racial groups, women, and the LGBT+ community in particular--were afforded legal rights that surpassed those of many Western countries. On paper, the transition to democracy was a successful one, and the country appeared to be rising above its past challenges and preparing itself for a future characterized by peace and equality for all. Women's rights in the country were among the most comprehensive and progressive in the world, and the future for women in the country seemed to be far brighter than anyone could have expected.

In reality, the products of the country's democratization have proven to be both positive and negative; many issues have been addressed and partially resolved, while many apartheid-era problems have persisted into the present. Rights and protections codified in law have in many cases failed to translate into practice or to positively change public perception and stigma. It is important to identify the progress that has been made in the realm of women's rights to illustrate how a century of female activism has paid off in the post-apartheid era. Likewise, it is important to examine the shortcomings in the law and the disconnects between legislation and reality to identify the parts of South African society that still require improvement to become truly equal.

Rural women, in particular, have seen the lowest rate of improvement in their daily lives. Lower class women of color still have unequal access to education and employment opportunities. Many black South African women remain illiterate, with the highest instances of illiteracy being found in rural communities where most females are unable to attend school. A

lack of proper education limits the jobs that impoverished women can attain, which feeds into the cyclical poverty that is pervasive among black and coloured communities in South Africa. In turn, most black and coloured women occupy the same types of low paying positions that they have historically held, such as street vendors, agricultural workers, and domestic laborers. The groups of women who were the furthest marginalized during apartheid have gained very few opportunities to ascend out of their marginalized positions, and largely remaining impoverished, under-educated, and with extremely few opportunities for any sort of upward mobility.<sup>135</sup>

Another way in which many women of color remain marginalized based on gender is the perpetuated usage of customary law. Since the fall of apartheid, the South African government has struggled with how best to handle traditional forms of customary law, and whether or not individual human rights should outweigh the rights and traditions of cultural groups. Because of the broad diversity in the country, many different cultural systems exist and thrive, and each has their own practices to which they want to be allowed to adhere. Traditional, customary marriages still remain the norm in many black communities and are protected by the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of 1998, which provides protections for customary marriages and the practice of polygyny.<sup>136</sup> Not all customary marriages are sexist or oppressive in nature, of course. Thousands of women a year across South Africa willingly and enthusiastically take part in customary and polygynous marriages. However, the correlation between customary marriage and domestic abuse remains very high, which signifies a perpetuation of relationship violence as a side effect of a customary practice that has traditionally treated women as second-class citizens,

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<sup>135</sup> Seidman, 296-297

<sup>136</sup> Parliament of South Africa, *Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of 1998*, 1998, online. <https://www.justice.gov.za/acts/recognition-of-customary-marriages-act> (accessed April 15th, 2019).

or even as property. Women in communities that still uphold customary law are often times victims of cultural oppression because of traditions of patriarchal domination over women.<sup>137</sup>

Coloured and Indian women are not immune to cultural sexism and patriarchal oppression either. Smitha Radharkrishnan has written on the complexities of the gendered experiences of Indianness in South Africa, stating that Indian women are oftentimes berated for “failing to behave as an Indian women should,” and are held to different, gender-based standards than their male counterparts. She also says, however, that many Indian women still believe themselves to be “inherently morally superior to Black women,” which perpetuates divides and tensions between the two groups even in the post-apartheid era.<sup>138</sup> Many women remain discriminated against because of their religion and culture, as well. Muslim women are discriminated against by the state, as traditional Muslim marriages are not state recognized. Women in these marriages can be denied inheritance, often leaving them with nothing in the event of their husband passing away. Women of all cultures still face many issues of discrimination and mistreatment owing not only their gender, but also to their race, ethnicity, political ideology, and religion.<sup>139</sup>

Women belonging to the LGBT+ community<sup>140</sup> also remain marginalized and are often discriminated against or mistreated despite protections afforded to them in the Constitution.

Transgender woman, L. Leigh Ann van der Merwe, has written on current issues facing trans

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<sup>137</sup> Aninka Claassens, “Recent Changes in Women’s Land Rights and Contested Customary Law in South Africa” *Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol 13, no 1. (2013) 85-90.

<sup>138</sup> Smitha Radharkrishnan, “Time to Show Our True Colors”: The Gendered Politics of “Indianness” in Post-Apartheid South Africa” *Gender and Society*, vol 19, no 2. (2005) 275-281.

<sup>139</sup> Ashley Martabano and Michelle O’Sullivan, “Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back: LEgal Activism for Women’s Rights in South Africa” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 60. (2004) 58-59.

<sup>140</sup> Or, LGBTQ community. LGBTQ is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning. The + in LGBT+ signifies the existence of more sexual orientations, such as pansexual and asexual.

women in South Africa, asserting that lingering transphobia is “a manifestation of a colonial legacy,” and that black trans women remain especially marginalized as “the likelihood of violence and exclusion increases with each intersecting oppression.”<sup>141</sup> Van der Merwe also addresses the exclusion of trans women from feminist discourse in the country, as “cisgender” feminists have always employed biological determinism as a justification of trans women’s exclusion from feminist spaces.”<sup>142</sup> Trans persons living in South Africa are often still the target of violent hate crimes and often times lack proper medical care and face discrimination in spaces such as the workplace. Work is being done to protect trans women, however, especially by the organizations S.H.E--Social, Health, and Empowerment Feminist Collective of Transgender Women in Africa--and Gender DynamiX.<sup>143</sup>

Lesbian and bisexual women also remain the victims of many types of discrimination. Although alternative sexualities have been more widely accepted in South African society than they were historically, they are still often stigmatized, especially in black and coloured communities. Although same-sex marriage was legalized with the passing of the new Constitution in 1994, a monumental win for the LGBT+ community, those who engage in same-sex marriage are frequently the targets of violence, hatred, and discrimination. Legality has done little to reduce social stigma. Women in the LGBT+ community are also at risk of “corrective rape,” in which men rape women because of their belief that it will cure the latter of their homosexuality and make them more “African.” Much work still needs to be done to achieve safety and true equality for women in the LGBT+ community.

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<sup>141</sup> L Leigh Ann van der Merwe “Transfeminism(s) from the Global South: Experiences from South Africa” *Development*, 60. (2017) 91-92.

<sup>142</sup> A person whose gender corresponds with their biological sex

<sup>143</sup> “About Us” GenderDynamiX. <https://www.genderdynamix.org.za/about-us> (Accessed July 1st, 2019).

Rape continues to be an issue facing many South African women, a crime which remains an all-too-frequent occurrence in the country. South Africa has at many times been dubbed the “rape capital of the world” and consistently ranks near the top of the list of countries with the highest instances of sexual violence. Many factors are to blame for the country’s high prevalence of rape. Social stigma surrounding rape and the low rates of incarceration for alleged rapists ensures that many women keep quiet about their attacks, which in turn means that many attackers never experience any type of consequences for their actions and are free to continue their abuse. Rape also remains a form of male domination over women, with high instances of abuse occurring at the hands of traditional male authority figures, such as husbands and employers. Some cultural practices and misconceptions also encourage rape, such as the practice of “corrective rape” of lesbian and bisexual women and, the belief in the “virgin cleansing myth” which asserts that having sex with a virgin can cure a man of HIV or AIDS. This myth has led to the rape of many children and infants in the country, an unfortunate phenomenon that must be addressed with public health education and a crackdown on sexual violence.<sup>144</sup> Although organizations such as Rape Crisis continue to work to alleviate the country’s rape epidemic, there has not been a decrease in the prevalence of rape and sexual assault in the post-apartheid era. More focus on community outreach programs and sex education programs in schools is needed to disprove misconceptions about rape and help to cure the country of its rape epidemic.

In the same vein as sexual abuse, domestic abuse is still rampant in South Africa, even after the passing of the South African Domestic Violence Act of 1998. Misogyny and the practice of male domination runs deep in the country, and legislation has proved ineffective in making any sort of meaningful change when it comes to violence against women. In many South

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<sup>144</sup> Martin R. Jewkes and Kekana L Penn, “The Virgin Cleansing Myth, Cases of Child Rape are not Exotic” *The Lancet*, vol 359, issue 9307. (2002), 711.

African cultures, including black, coloured, and Indian communities, women are still viewed as second class citizens who are expected to be obedient to their husbands and who risk physical punishment if they are not deemed adequately compliant. Traditional gender roles are still heavily enforced in many cases--even in white communities--and the issue of relationship violence is still viewed by many as a private matter and not a criminal or legal issue. Further action must be taken in order to curb the high rate of domestic violence in the country and to ensure that it is given the priority that it deserves.<sup>145146</sup>

Women remain largely unequal in the realm of employment as well. Although the Employment Equity Act is supposed to ensure equality in the workplace for men and women, women continue to face much discrimination. Women are guaranteed equal pay for equal work, yet South African women make on average 27% less than men, and the pay gap is only worsening over time; for example, the gender pay gap doubled between January 2017 and November 2018.<sup>147</sup> Women, especially women of color, face higher rates of unemployment than their male peers. They are also at far higher risk of sexual abuse from coworkers and employers. Some rural black women who move to the cities to find work engage in ‘transactional sex’ in exchange for employment, putting them at risk for HIV, which remains a huge threat to South African society; the country has the fourth largest HIV rate in the world.<sup>148</sup> Women belonging to all races often occupy lower paying positions than men, and have far greater difficulty ascending

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<sup>145</sup> Adele Baleta, “Studies Reveal the Extent of Domestic Violence in South Africa”. *The Lancet*, vol 354, issue 9178. (1999). 580.

<sup>146</sup> Amanda Spies, “Continued State Liability for Police Inaction in Assisting Victims of Domestic Violence: A Reflection on the Implementation of South Africa’s Domestic Violence Legislation” *Journal of African Law* 63 (1): 53-57.

<sup>147</sup> Tom Head “Gender Pay Gap: Four Charts That Show a Shocking Gulf Between SA Men and Women” *The South African*, November 30, 2018.

<sup>148</sup> “South African Rural Women Risk HIV for Employment”. 2004. *Obesity, Fitness & Wellness Week*: 121.

to better jobs. Even in the present, most positions of power and high pay are occupied by men. Unequal pay and unequal opportunities for employment need to be addressed so that women have the same access to a livable wage and upward mobility as men do.

South African women still face a host of problems. Some of these problems only affect certain groups of women, such as the continued tradition of customary lobola marriages in many African communities. Other issues are not race specific, such as the gender pay gap, violence against women, and discrimination against and mistreatment of women in the LGBT+ community. Fortunately, a number of women's rights groups in the country are working diligently to ensure the protection of women's (inalienable) rights. These groups stand bravely against gender oppression, and feminist activism and organization is thriving in South Africa today.

Sonke Gender Justice, a nonprofit based in Cape Town, operates on the belief that "women and men, girls and boys can work together to resist patriarchy, advocate for gender justice, and achieve gender transformation." Their work centers around gendered issues such as equal pay, violence against women, and HIV/AIDS.<sup>149</sup> Women's Legal Centre, also based in Cape Town, is a nonprofit geared toward achieving gender equality, with a particular focus on black women. Their primary purpose is to give free legal advice to women regarding healthcare, domestic and sexual violence, workplace discrimination, and access to basic needs such as food and shelter.<sup>150</sup> Groups specifically addressing violence against women have also become prevalent, such as People Opposing Woman Abuse or, POWA, which is a "feminist, women's rights organization that provides services and engages in advocacy in order to ensure the

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<sup>149</sup> "About Us" Sonke Gender Justice. <http://sonkegenderjustice.org.za/about-us> (Accessed July 2nd, 2019).

<sup>150</sup> "About Us" Women's Legal Centre. <http://www.wlce.co.za/about-us> (Access July 2nd, 2019).

realisations of women's rights and thereby improve women's quality of life."<sup>151</sup> The embracing of feminist ideology in the post-apartheid era is obvious in the prevalence of women's rights organizations such as these around the country.

Some apartheid-era organizations are still functioning in the present day, as well. The ANC Women's League is still active, though it has faced much criticism from feminists in the past decade for its failure to condemn former president Jacob Zuma for rape allegations.<sup>152</sup> The Black Sash continues to work toward achieving and protecting human rights, with a specific focus on women and children. Rape Crisis is also still functioning, and remains a proudly feminist organization whose "mission is to promote safety in communities, to reduce the trauma experienced by rape survivors, to encourage the reporting of rape, and to work actively to address flaws in legislation."<sup>153</sup> Organizations such as these that were formed and maintained during the apartheid era by women with feminist perspectives paved the way for the creation and success of women's rights groups that are working to improve the status of South African women today.

Although female activists and women's organizations during the 20th century made huge strides in the realm of women's rights, and legislation passed during the country's transition to democracy ensured a whole new set of protections for women in the country, women remain largely marginalized in South African society. Legislation has not translated effectively into improved quality of life for women, and they continue to face challenges, including employment, educational opportunities, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and mistreatment based on sexuality. However, the widespread prevalence of feminist activists and organizations around the country

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<sup>151</sup> "About Us" People Against Women Abuse. <https://www.powa.co/za/POWA/about-us> (Accessed July 2nd, 2019).

<sup>152</sup> Hassim, 219.

<sup>153</sup> "About Us" Rape Crisis. <https://rapecrisis.org.za/about-us> (Accessed July 3rd, 2019).



illustrates the passion that still exists for the advancement of women's rights and the struggle for equality in South Africa. Hopefully, in the near future, the status of women will be elevated as these groups and activists work to ensure the safety and equality of all South African citizens.

## Conclusion

Historically, women in South Africa have been oppressed solely because of their gender, and they have consequently been the victims of many types of mistreatment and discrimination. Women of color especially have suffered from a triple yoke of oppression wherein they have been long oppressed because of their gender, race, and class. South Africa has a longstanding tradition of ‘othering’ groups of people and systematically categorizing peoples by their gender, race, and socioeconomic status in order to maintain a social hierarchy in which white men are at the top and all other groups are believed to be inferior. This was especially true following the rise to power of the National Party in 1948 and the subsequent implementation of the apartheid system. The apartheid government worked to maintain its preferred racial hierarchy, as well as its idea of proper gender roles. Traditional, customary cultures were patriarchal in nature and were frequently unfair toward women, while cultural sexism was rampant, greatly restricting women’s rights to land ownership and child custody and often times leaving them vulnerable to various forms of abuse. Women of all races were considered minors under the law until 1986, which greatly restricted their legal rights and the spaces that they were allowed to occupy in society.

Women have long been viewed as secondary players in the realm of political activism; perceived as largely being passive in political struggles beyond serving as a support system for the men. Female activism in its own right remains an under-examined and underappreciated topic, one that has just begun to gain serious traction in the past decade. Despite a dearth of literature on female activism, especially in comparison to male political activists, archival and autobiographical evidence maps out a rich history of political consciousness among South African women and correlating activism against not only the racist, oppressive system of

apartheid, but also geared specifically toward women's rights. Beginning in the 1910s with female resistance toward passes, women with a feminist mindset have been at the forefront of a gradual but effective women's rights movement that has spanned over a century and made a great impact on legal rights for women in the country.

Feminism in the South African example has historically been a topic of contention. The term "feminist" has long carried a negative connotation and has generally been rejected by the masses of women of color because it was seen as a Western import and an ideology belonging to the enemy--privileged white women. Consequently, academics have had a difficult time analyzing feminism in South Africa and determining what perspectives, behaviors, and actions qualify as being feminist, when the women behind them would likely reject the label. Additionally, scholars have long struggled with categorizing what branch of feminist ideology best describes South African women, such as African feminism, transnational feminism, or third-world feminism. I believe the South African example does not fit cleanly into any of these theoretical frameworks, because of its broadly diverse population and the extremely varying experiences of different groups of women.<sup>154</sup>

Another reductionist practice amongst scholars is the tendency to organize the South African experience into binaries--rich/poor, rural/urban, black/white. So much focus has been placed on difference that issues and experiences that transcend these lines tend to be overlooked. This paints far too simple a picture of South African social history. It is important to view this history through a lens of intersectionality and cooperation to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of South African people and to recognize that even though the society was deeply, systematically categorized based on differences between groups, this

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<sup>154</sup> Herr, 16-17.

segregation was often breached in order to promote positive change in a very damaged society. In this thesis, I have attempted to move away from the binary lens through which South African society is often viewed in order to highlight examples of multiracial cooperation as a vehicle for positive change. Through these examples it becomes clear that the practices of viewing feminist ideology as something entirely different when applied to different groups is flawed. Although women of different races and classes did have and continue to have vastly different life experiences, there are some issues that transcend these lines and women throughout South African history have suffered at the hands of patriarchal oppression, regardless of their sociodemographic categorization.<sup>155</sup>

Women in South Africa have never been passive victims of their many oppressors. Rather, they have challenged gender oppression both through informal methods, such as refusing to partake in customary marriage or obtaining their own employment in order to ensure they were not financially codependent on men, to formal methods of political action and organization. Women belonging to all racial groups had their own particular experiences of gender discrimination, yet they many times worked together in organizations such as the Federation of South African Women, the ANC Women's League, and the Women's National Coalition in order to improve the status of women across the country, not just any particular group. Through both informal and formal methods of resistance, women proved themselves to be crucial players both in the anti-apartheid movement and the struggle for women's rights. Countless women sacrificed their home lives, their livelihood, their freedom, and their lives for these struggles, and they never gave up even in the face of targeted violence, mass detention, and mistreatment from male family members, spouses, and employers. Their persistence made great impact on the

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<sup>155</sup> Judith Stevenson, "'The Mamas Were Ripe': Ideologies of Motherhood and Public Resistance in a South African Township" *Feminist Formations* vol 23, no 2. (2011) 146.

female experience in South Africa, and forever changed the legislation pertaining to women's rights so that women are now afforded far more legal protections than they ever were in the past.<sup>156</sup>

With this thesis, I have demonstrated that the women's rights movement cannot be viewed as something belonging to any one group of people, nor can it be narrowed to a phenomenon spanning only the last two decades of the twentieth century. To adopt this narrow engagement is to limit one's understanding of the complexities of the movement. It is invaluable to instead view the women's rights movement, and the development of a feminist consciousness that began with Charlotte Maxeke and the Bloemfontein Anti-Pass Campaign in 1913, and which subsequently spanned the entirety of the twentieth century. Throughout this time, women of all races and ideology worked to improve their lives as well as the lives of all women in South Africa, consistently working to answer 'the woman question' and carve out a better, more equal space for women in South African society. These women displayed heroism and courage and made impressive strides in the fight for women's rights, and they ultimately helped to create a democratic nation in which women were afforded more legal rights than in almost any other country in the world. Although women in South Africa still face a host of gender specific issues today, groups and activists continue to follow this tradition of feminist activism in order to achieve a more safe and equal society in which every demographic can thrive.

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<sup>156</sup> Gay W. Seidman, "Gendered Citizenship: South Africa's Democratic Transition and the Construction of a Gendered State" *Gender and Society* vol 13. No 3. (1999) 295.

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